The New Criterion

November 2000

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *November 2000*

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Notes & Comments: November 2000

Will there always be an England?

We have often remarked on what difficult times these are for the art of parody. If he is to be successful, a parodist must be able to count on his audience's ability to distinguish clearly between the parody and the reality being spoofed. The triumph of political correctness has long since blurred that distinction. Whose ideological antennae are sensitive enough to register accurately the shifting claims of victimhood and entitlement? A mayoral aide in Washington, D.C. uses the word "niggardly" in conversation with a black colleague; the colleague takes offense because he thinks "niggardly" is racist; the aide promptly offers his resignation, which is accepted. True or parodic exaggeration? True, all too true.

"Racism," of course, is something it behooves us all to worry about constantly, never mind that the word is a neologism so recent that it failed to make the 1970 edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*. But what about "ageism"? There was a time, not so terribly long ago, when the term "ageism," to the extent that one heard it at all, was used as a joke. No one took it as a moral failing. But that was before "ageism" was enrolled in the index of impermissible attitudes, and federal legislation was passed to prohibit it. When the culture of victimhood really took root in the early 1990s, one heard various wags complaining about the treatment of the "vertically challenged," i.e., short people. Very funny that, until Smith College caught up with the jest and decreed that henceforth "lookism"—the heinous belief that some people are more attractive than others—was prohibited. You see how hard things have become for parodists. Indeed, we begin to wonder whether they as a group might not qualify for endangered minority status, since they are clearly victims of an institutionalized prejudice that threatens not only their language, history, and tribal customs, but also their very survival. We hope that the next Congress, whatever its party complexion, will find time to address this important issue.

In any event, although this sort of political correctness initially seemed to be primarily an American phenomenon, it quickly spread to other countries. It took root most thoroughly in countries, like Canada, that exist essentially as appendages of the United States. (Of course, politically correct Canadians are reflexively anti-American, but then so are most politically correct Americans.) At first, habits of irony and common sense helped to inoculate Britain against the virus of political correctness. But Tony Blair, the least ironical prime minister in recent history, largely neutralized those defenses. For the last several years, Britain has been playing an aggressive game of catch-up in political correctness. Today, it rivals and

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perhaps even surpasses the United States in its devotion to all things PC. If there were an Olympics of political correctness, Britain would be in contention for gold in nearly every event.

But wait: let us apologize for using the term "Britain." After all, a four-hundred-page report just issued for Tony Blair's government tells us that the word "British" has "racist connotations." If irony were still allowed, it might be thought ironical that this report, "The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain," was prepared by a think-tank named the Runnymede Trust. After all, Runnymede was the meadow where King John, in 1215, set his seal to Magna Carta, a founding document in the development of that glorious, freedom-nurturing institution, British common law.

Well, we used to be able to think that it was glorious and freedom-nurturing. These days one cannot be sure. In any event, "The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain" instructs us that if there is one thing worse than being British, it is being English.

> To be English, as the term is used, is to be white. Britishness is not ideal, but at least it appears acceptable when suitably qualified, such as Black British, Indian British, British Muslim and so on.
>
> There is one insuperable barrier: Britishness, as much as Englishness, has systematic, largely unspoken, racist connotations. Whiteness nowhere features as an explicit condition of being British, but it is widely understood that Englishness is racially coded. The unstated assumption is that Britishness and whiteness go together like roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. There has been no collective working through of the imperial experience.
>
> The absence from the national curriculum of a rewritten history of Britain as an imperial force, involving dominance in Ireland, Africa, the Caribbean and Asia, is proving to be an unmitigated disaster.

"Rewritten history"? Indeed, among the many recommendations made by "The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain" is the demand that British history be "revised, rethought or jettisoned" in order to meet the requirements of "inclusivity." The report makes many other recommendations—it calls, for example, for race equality and "cultural diversity" inspections in schools, and suggests that television franchise holders be required to appoint a specified number of Blacks and Asians. Expanding on the recommendations after the report was released, Lady Gavron, vice-chairman of the commission, said "It would have been great if Prince Charles had been told to marry someone black. Imagine what message that would have sent out." (*Told to*? What if Lady Gavron had been "told to" marry a Tory?)

It is unclear exactly how Tony Blair's government will deal with the recommendations contained in the Runnymede Trust's report. Vigorous criticism in *The Daily Telegraph* and elsewhere has led the government to distance itself somewhat from elements of the report. But initially it was greeted with enthusiasm. "This is a timely report," Mike O'Brien, the Home Office minister said, "which adds much to the current debate on multi-ethnic Britain. The Government is profoundly committed to racial equality and the celebration of diversity. We are a multi-cultural society."

Of course, Britain has always been a multicultural society. But until recently it has had the wit to subordinate questions of race and ethnicity to the common project of national identity. As an editorialist for the *Telegraph* noted, "it is our common nationality that allows us to define Britishness in civic, rather than racial, terms." Bikhu Parekh, emeritus professor of political theory at Hull University and chairman of the commission responsible for the Runnymede Trust's report, has no patience with this sort of integrationist model. "The term integration is misleading," he said, "as it implies a one-way process in which 'minorities' are to be absorbed into the non-existent homogeneous culture of the 'majority.'"

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Leave aside the bad grammar and tangled logic of that sentence, with its misused "as" and spectacle of phantom absorption. What about the substance of Lord (as he now is) Parekh's recommendation? Any process of assimilation is a two-way street; but is the integrationist model, with its goal of fitting minorities into the language, customs, and values of the majority society, really such a bad one? What is the alternative? One vivid alternative is provided by Bikhu Parekh's native India, where the caste system dealt with the problem of different ethnicities and classes in a very different way from Britain. There are a lot of negative asides about Britain's imperial history in the Runnymede Trust's report, but which was worse: Britain's stewardship in India, which brought modern technology, education, common law, and an end to practices like suttee to a backward country, or the murder and mayhem that left a million dead after the Brits, under intense pressure, allowed the Indians to try to govern themselves?

One editorialist described "The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain" as "sub-Marxist gibberish." It is that, but it is also a perfect example of what the journalist Minette Marrin calls the "Indignation Industry" at work. As Ms. Marrin notes, not only does indignation—unlike its close cousin, guilt—provide "intoxicating floods of righteous excitement, even (oddly enough) when it is directed at oneself," but it also provides employment. Like America, Britain is now at the mercy of "an immense army of commissions and quangos and workshops and quality assurance teams and guidelines committees and interdisciplinary evaluation groups and re-evaluation advisory bodies and joint consultative boards, all in hot and indignant pursuit of an 'ism' of some kind—heterosexism, racism, handicapism, anything." "The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain" is a perfect specimen of political correctness in action. Like all such products, it has the odd effect of making parody simultaneously more difficult and more necessary. It also makes unflagging criticism absolutely imperative.

Derrida month

It goes without saying that political correctness is not the only thing that makes parody difficult these days. There are also the excesses of academic culture. New York University is generally regarded as a reasonably serious educational institution; anyway, it certainly charges its students as if it were. What are we to make, then, of the fact that this "private university in the public service" (NYU's motto) declared October "Derrida Month" after the French deconstructionist and part-time NYU faculty member Jacques Derrida? When we first saw the flyer announcing the month-long series of symposia, lectures, films, *hommages*, and general exercises in hagiography, we thought perhaps it was some sort of hoax. But no, it is meant earnestly if not, exactly, seriously. On October 16, for example, one could attend "Face to Face with Deconstruction," in which Joonsung Yoon was scheduled to deliver "Seeing His Own Absence: Yasumasa Morimura's Photographic Self-Portraits," Susan Sterling was to weigh in with "Making-Up Gender, Sexuality, and Self-Presence in Annie Liebowitz's *Women* and Helmut Newton's *Immorale*," and Ben Binstock was to contribute "De-nuding the Face, or, Deconstruction as Art History." On October 17, the great Derrida himself was to lecture on the subject of perjury—an appropriate topic, we thought.

"No one reading, writing or thinking today," we read in the announcement, "can avoid the iconoclastic French philosopher Jacques Derrida." We cannot let that statement pass unchallenged. Like the southerner who, when asked if he believed in infant baptism, replied, "Believe it? I've seen it," we know that reading, writing, and thinking can certainly be accomplished today without Jacques Derrida; the question is whether they can survive too close an acquaintance with that pseudo-sage's hermetic nonsense. Just to keep things in perspective, tuition, room, and board at NYU is currently $33,562 per year. *Caveat emptor.*

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Tocqueville today

by Roger Kimball

What saddens me is, not that our society is democratic, but that the vices which we have inherited and acquired make it so difficult for us to obtain or to keep well-regulated liberty. And I know nothing so miserable as a democracy without liberty.
—Alexis de Tocqueville, in a letter of 1857

A serious life means being fully aware of the alternatives, thinking about them with all the intensity one brings to bear on life-and-death questions, in full recognition that every choice is a great risk with necessary consequences that are hard to bear.
—Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*

Men do not receive the truth from their enemies, and their friends scarcely offer it to them; that is why I have spoken it.
—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Alexis de Tocqueville was about a month shy of his twenty-sixth birthday when he and his friend and fellow French magistrate Gustave de Beaumont (1802–1866) landed in Newport, Rhode Island, in May 1831. Both were so to speak refugees from French politics. When the Bourbon dynasty fell the previous summer, the two men swore fealty to the new government of Louis Philippe. But neither felt in sympathy with the heavy-handed policies of the "citizen king" whom Daumier parodied to such hilarious effect. The lack of sympathy was reciprocated. Tocqueville was demoted and required to take the oath of allegiance a second time. It was then that he hit upon the scheme of going to America. He and Beaumont petitioned the government for an eighteen-month leave to travel to the United States and study its penal system. After much red tape (there is a reason that "bureaucracy" is a French word), permission was granted, though in the event their trip was cut short and they were obliged to return after only nine months. Their work on the American penal system and its application to France was duly published in 1833. But from the beginning, as Tocqueville noted in a letter, the penal system had been merely a "pretext." The real reason that he and Beaumont went to America was to see firsthand "what a great republic is": to immerse themselves in the world's preeminent democratic regime and ponder its lessons.

They were indefatigable travelers. After disembarking at Newport, Tocqueville and Beaumont went by steamer from Providence to New York City. From there, they traveled to Buffalo, traversed the Great Lakes to what was then the frontier in Michigan and Wisconsin. They spent two weeks in Canada, then wended their way down to Baltimore, stopping along the way in Boston and Philadelphia. They went to Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, to Nashville, Memphis, and New Orleans. The final leg of their journey brought them back through Washington to New York. They rode on horses, in coaches, and in steamboats (one

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of which sank); they stayed in a log cabin; they observed many plain folk and met many eminent personages, including John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, and Sam Houston. They devoured newspapers and broadsheets, and Tocqueville, at any rate, absorbed the lessons of *The Federalist* and Judge Story's famous commentaries on the Constitution.

Although Tocqueville later said that he did not go to America with the idea of writing a book about his experiences, it is clear from his correspondence that he and Beaumont initially had some sort of collaborative project in mind. Both kept journals (Tocqueville's was published as *Journey to America*). At some point, the idea of collaboration fell by the wayside. They traveled together, but they kept to separate mental itineraries. In 1835, Beaumont came to the end of his when he published a didactic novel on race called *Marie, ou l'esclavage aux Etats-Unis: Tableau des moeurs américaines.*

Tocqueville spoke warmly about the work of his friend. But whatever the virtues of Beaumont's book, when it comes to insight into *moeurs américaines* there are few, if any, books that rival Tocqueville's own contribution to the subject, *De la démocratie en amérique*. *Marie* is a period piece; *Democracy in America* is a masterpiece. It is, as Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop note in the introduction to their sparkling new translation, "at once the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America."[1]

High praise. But Tocqueville inspires superlatives. Lord Acton wrote that "of all writers, [Tocqueville] is the most widely acceptable, and the hardest to find fault with. He is always wise, always right, and as just as Aristides." Well, Tocqueville was wrong about some things. Not all of his predictions have come to pass. One is amazed, for example, at his judgment that the influence of *lawyers* forms one of "the most powerful barriers today against the lapses of democracy." Still, one may endorse the spirit of Lord Acton's remarks. John Stuart Mill wrote in a review that *Democracy in America* had "at once taken its rank among the most remarkable productions of our time." And in our own day, Russell Kirk praised Tocqueville as "the best friend democracy has ever had, and democracy's most candid critic."

The two go together, friend and critic. In his classic study, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (1982; English trans., 1996), the French philosopher Pierre Manent noted that democracy has always had two sorts of enemies: the declared enemies who wish to abolish democracy outright and restore aristocracy or some other regime that enshrines political inequality; and the "immoderate friends" who seek to extend the central democratic imperative of equality into every realm of life, thus assuring oppressive new inequalities. Both are dangerous; the activities of both shackle freedom, one by design, the other unwittingly. Manent is right that, today, the immoderate friends of democracy are "incomparably more numerous than its enemies." To love democracy well, he concludes, "it is necessary to love it moderately."

It is a paradox—I almost said a "Tocquevillean paradox"—of human life that the highest excellences are almost always achieved through moderate, not extreme, zeal. There is something blinding about zealousness, something that overshoots the mark. Eagerness attracts; over-eagerness repels. "Moderation"—what the Greeks called *sophrosune*—is an aristocratic as well as an ancient virtue. It is not, Tocqueville thought, a virtue native to democracy, though he hoped that it might become, by art, democracy's second nature. That, I believe, is part of what he meant when he said that "a new political science is needed for a world altogether new." *Democracy in America* is the basic textbook of that new political science.

Tocqueville personally instantiated the conundrum that he wrote about. The

1 *Democracy in America*, translated, edited, and introduced by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop; University of Chicago Press, 722 pages, $35.

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Comte Alexis-Henri-Charles-Maurice Clérel de Tocqueville—to give him his full complement of syllables—was himself an aristocrat, the scion of a venerable Norman family. One of his ancestors fought at Hastings with William the Conqueror. Tocqueville remained an aristocrat in temperament; in conviction, he early on became a liberal. "Readers of *Democracy in America*," Professors Mansfield and Winthrop observe, "have always disagreed over how democratic he was in mind and heart, but it is fair to say that he directed much of his energy to warning reactionaries in his country that democracy was irreversible as well as irresistible." Tocqueville looked about him and saw that democracy, the wave of the present, was also the fate of the future, at least in the West, in what could then still be called Christendom. Indeed, Tocqueville more than once dilates on his belief that there was something capital "P" Providential about the march of democracy, so that to oppose it would be not merely bootless but impious. (To wish to stop democracy, he wrote, would be "to struggle against God himself.")

Yet if Tocqueville was a passionate democrat, he was also a circumspect one. He knew what enormities could be perpetrated in its name. His own father had been imprisoned during the Terror, that irrational access of immoderately rational egalitarianism. He was one of the lucky ones: he escaped with his life, though his experiences in prison are said to have turned his hair snow-white at the age of twenty-two. The key to the new political science that Tocqueville envisions is the binocular insight that the democratic revolution is 1) irresistible and 2) "not yet rapid enough to despair of directing it." There was still time to "attenuate its vices and make its natural advantages emerge."

> To instruct democracy, if possible to reanimate its beliefs, to purify its mores, to regulate its movements, to substitute little by little the science of affairs for its inexperience, and knowledge of its true interests for its blind instincts; . . . such is the first duty imposed on those who direct society in our day.

Democracy in America is an attempt to instruct those entrusted with directing society in the rudiments of that duty. The book, Tocqueville explicitly says, is not a "panegyric" to democracy; but it is an invitation to rethink democracy, to make the inevitable palatable. Tocqueville spoke like Edmund Burke when he noted that "it seems that in our day the natural bond that unites opinions to tastes and actions to beliefs has been broken . . . the laws of moral analogy have been abolished." But he sounds more like one of Burke's opponents when he warns against those men, even noble souls, whose "idea of evil is indissolubly united with the idea of the new."

Like Tocqueville himself, *Democracy in America* is irretrievably Janus-faced, which is one reason that it speaks to people across the ideological spectrum. As the editors note, "it is striking that both Left and Right appeal to *Democracy in America* for support of" their contrary policies. The Left sees in Tocqueville a critic of the bourgeois addiction to material well-being and an apostle of civic engagement (at the very end of the book, in his last endnote, Tocqueville names "*general apathy*" the greatest danger of the age); the Right sees in him a prophet admonishing us about the dangers of big government and doctrinaire egalitarianism. Both are right, but wrong to think they tell the whole story. Tocqueville's wide appeal, the editors conclude, "should not mask the controversial and unsettling character of the work."

Of course, "controversial" is a debased word today; it encompasses little more than a certain species of headline-making clichés. Tocqueville is controversial and unsettling in a more permanent sense. He does not shock or outrage us, like the latest "cutting-edge" art offering; on the contrary, like all thinkers who ask fundamental questions, he induces a mood of calm solicitude. If he is "unsettling" it is because he poses important questions for which there are no pat,

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no settled, answers. What Tocqueville wrote was not a manifesto but an essential reflection on political life—which is to say *our* life in so far as we exist as social creatures. The questions he asks remain our questions: "On What Tempers the Tyranny of the Majority in the United States," "Why Democratic Peoples Show a More Ardent and More Lasting Love for Equality than for Freedom," "How the Americans Understand the Equality of Men and Women," "Why the Americans Show Themselves So Restless in the Midst of Their Well-Being." At the end of his introduction to the first volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville notes that his

> book is not precisely in anyone's camp; in writing it I did not mean to serve or contest any party; I undertook to see, not differently, but further than the parties; and while they are occupied with the next day, I wanted to ponder the future.

His success in that endeavor accounts for what the editors describe as the "discomfiting sagacity of Tocqueville, always more sensitive than reassuring."

The first volume of *Democracy in America* was published, to great acclaim, in 1835; Tocqueville wrote it very rapidly, some 180,000 words in under a year. The second volume—which was less of a public success—was not published until 1840. The delay was caused by many things, including Tocqueville's courtship of and marriage to Mary Mottley, an Englishwoman, and several bouts of illness. (Tocqueville was sick much of his adult life; he died, probably of tuberculosis, in 1859, in his fifty-fourth year). The first volume of *Democracy in America* describes the physical situation of the United States, traces the origins of American democracy in Puritan New England, analyzes the Constitution and the powers it sets forth, and warns about the "tyranny of the majority," a leitmotif in Tocqueville's discussion of democracy. Along the way, Tocqueville has many sobering things to say about the sad fate of the American Indian ("the ruin of these peoples began on the day when Europeans landed on their shores") and blacks under slavery. (Tocqueville is not so much condemnatory as rueful; and his ruefulness is not confined to the whites of America: "Would not one say," he asks, that "the European is to men of other races what man himself is to the animals? He makes them serve his use, and when he cannot bend them, he destroys them.")

In the second volume, Tocqueville is more meditative. He steps back to describe the way democracy has affected intellectual life, manners and morals, and political society. In the famous opening section, "On the Philosophic Method of the Americans," he writes that although there is "no country in the civilized world where [people] are less occupied with philosophy than in the United States," one can nevertheless descry a distinctively American—and by implication, distinctively democratic—outlook and "philosophic method."

> To escape from the spirit of system, from the yoke of habits, from family maxims, from class opinions, and, up to a certain point, from national prejudices; to take tradition only as information, and current facts only as a useful study for doing otherwise and better; to seek the reason for things by themselves and in themselves alone, to strive for a result without letting themselves be chained to the means, and to see through that to the foundation: these are the principal features that characterize what I shall call the philosophic method of the Americans.

"America," he concludes, "is therefore the one country in the world where the precepts of Descartes are least studied and best followed." Tocqueville is by turns impressed and made anxious by this unwitting "Cartesianism"; it helps account for the vitality of American democracy; perhaps it also helps to account for its roughness, superficiality, and lack of communal spirit. Much of the second volume is concerned with the implications of this tension.

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There have been essentially three translations of *Democracy in America*. I say "essentially three" because the first, undertaken by Tocqueville's English friend Henry Reeve, was twice recast and corrected, first by Francis Bowen in 1862, then by Phillips Bradley in 1945. The Reeve work is fluent, engaging, and subtly at odds with Tocqueville's complex championship of democracy. "Without wishing to do so," Tocqueville admonished his friend in a letter, "you quite vividly colored what was contrary to Democracy and almost erased what could do harm to Aristocracy." The second translation, by George Lawrence, was published in 1966; it, too, is fluent and engaging, but is far more interpretive than literal. The new translation by Professors Mansfield and Winthrop (who, incidentally, have also collaborated on marriage) strikes just the right balance between the demands of literal accuracy and readability. They have given us a Tocqueville for today; but what they have given us today is *Tocqueville*, with all his richnesses and stylistic idiosyncrasies (his penchant for short paragraphs, for instance, which was not respected by earlier translators). The editors have also provided a detailed subject index and have intelligently annotated the text. Especially in his second volume, Tocqueville tended to let his thoughts spill forth without bothering to enumerate his sources; this gives his text a peculiar brilliancy, but it obscures the vast amount of scholarship that went into *Democracy in America*. The editors discreetly supply the lack, not only citing Tocqueville's sources but also noting important marginal notes in the author's drafts. (The manuscript given to the printer has not survived, but Tocqueville's working manuscripts, these two Harvard professors tell us, "are preserved at the Beinecke Library at a university located in New Haven, Conn.")

The Mansfield-Winthrop work will henceforth be the preferred English version of *Democracy in America* not only because of the superior translation and critical apparatus, but also because of its long and masterly introductory essay, itself an important contribution to the literature on Tocqueville. I have only two nits to pick. One is that the index does not include the text of the editors' introduction—a pity because in that remarkable essay they cite many writers and works that Tocqueville's readers will wish to have a handy reference for.

I am also sorry that the editors choose to translate *inquiét* and its cognates as "restive" ("restiveness," etc.) instead of the more usual "restless." As they note, *inquiét* is a crucially important term in Tocqueville. It describes the essential condition of the democratic soul, as contrasted with the "natural immobility" of aristocratic nations.[2] Commenting on their decision, the editors say that "restive," "with its connotation of rebelliousness and intent," seemed better than "the more random 'restless.'" The problem is that "restive" is not a special form of restlessness but something closer to its opposite. It derives from the Latin *restare*, meaning "to remain where one is, linger, 'stay put.'" In a usage note, *The American Heritage Dictionary* tells us that "restive" and "restless" are "now commonly used as equivalent terms" (though it adds that "restive" "implies resistance to some sort of restraint"). But this is merely to codify a solecism. *The Oxford English Dictionary* underscores the problem with its definition of "restive": "1. Inclined to rest or remain stationary"; "2. Persistent, obstinate, settled or fixed in an opinion or course of action." This is not what Tocqueville meant by *inquiét*. In this essay, I have exercised the reviewer's privilege and have silently substituted "restless" for "restive."

Modern readers who first encounter *Democracy in America* are almost always

2 Tocqueville took the term, the editors show, from Pascal, who together with Rousseau and Montesquieu was one of the three men with whom he "live[d] a little every day." In a famous aphorism from the *Pensées*, Pascal described the human condition as *inconstance, ennui, inquiétude*. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville *seems* to present *inquiétude* in a largely positive light; it is interesting to ponder, therefore, the extent to which Tocqueville shared Pascal's dour estimation of this trait.

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amazed by Tocqueville's contemporaneity, his relevance to America *now*. One example: although the stability of American democracy means that elections present "no real danger," Tocqueville notes that one "can still consider the election of the president as a period of national crisis."

> Long before the appointed moment arrives, the election becomes the greatest and so to speak sole business preoccupying minds. The factions at that time redouble their ardor; in that moment all the factitious passion that the imagination can create in a happy and tranquil country become agitated in broad daylight. . . .
>
> The entire nation falls into a feverish state; the election is then the daily text of the public papers, the subject of particular conversations, the goal of all reasoning, the object of all thoughts, the sole interest of the present.

And then? "As soon as fortune has pronounced . . . this ardor is dissipated, everything becomes calm, and the river, one moment overflowed, returns peacefully to its bed."

How does he do it? How does he manage to sound like a contemporary pundit, only better? After all, when Tocqueville wrote, Andrew Jackson was president; there were only twenty-four states; the nation-defining events of the Civil War and the end of slavery lay decades in the future, to say nothing of the events of the twentieth century. How is it that so much of what Tocqueville has to say seems to apply as well to the United States *circa* 2000 as to the United States *circa* 1830? Tocqueville himself would not have been surprised. Toward the beginning of the first volume of *Democracy in America*, in a chapter called "On the Point of Departure and Its Importance for the Future of the Anglo-Americans," he writes that "peoples always feel the effects of their origins." Just as one can predict a man's "prejudices, habits, and passions" by contemplating his situation as an infant—"the man," Tocqueville says, "is so to speak whole in the swaddling clothes of his cradle"—so, too, with nations. In America, "there is not one opinion, one habit, one law, I could say one event, that the point of departure does not explain." The early experiences of the colonies—their relatively prosperous and well-educated citizenry, their political independence, their common language, above all their stalwart yoking of what Tocqueville calls the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of freedom* (elements that elsewhere are often opposed to each other)—forecast much of their future. Some things never change; some recur. Tocqueville notes with astonishment that among the "bizarre or tyrannical laws" promulgated early on in the colonies was one that "prohibits the use of tobacco." *Plus ça change.*

The chief intellectual drama of *Democracy in America* is the struggle between freedom and equality. Equality works to level differences; freedom to increase them. In the name of justice, equality requires us to forgo rank, privilege, even excellence: what is more discriminatory than talent? More unfair than ability? More divisive than brilliance? Freedom, too, appeals to justice: the justice due to achievement, not entitlement. What makes Tocqueville indispensable is his unparalleled appreciation of the fact that the health of democracy—the regime whose "primary fact" is the "equality of conditions"—requires not the triumph of equality but the careful perpetuation of this struggle: victory lies precisely in forsaking conquest. Speaking as the friend of democracy, Tocqueville constantly warns about elements inherent in democracy that, unchecked, make it inhospitable to freedom. Tocqueville's admonitions can mostly be grouped under two main headings: warnings about superficiality, and warnings about oppression.

Tocqueville discusses at some length the fact that democracies tend to champion material well-being to an unusual degree. He is not hostile to material well-being—far from it—but he notes that a single-minded pursuit of well-being tends to be curiously self-defeating. "It is a strange thing to see with what sort of feverish ardor Americans pursue well-being and how they show themselves constantly tormented by a vague

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fear of not having chosen the shortest route that can lead to it." In part this has to do with that restlessness, that *inquiétude*, that characterizes democratic man. In part it has to do with the fact that the desire for material well-being, when it degenerates into material*ism*, tends to exacerbate rather than satisfy man's cravings. Tocqueville speaks of "self-interest well understood" as one antidote to the poison of materialism: it turns out that self-interest is "well understood" only when it encompasses more than the self. Early on in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville warns about those "who, in the name of progress, striving to make man into matter, want to find the useful without occupying themselves with the just, to find science far from beliefs, and well-being separated from virtue." It is an essential part of Tocqueville's task, not always noticed, to insinuate the transcendent—justice, faith, virtue—into a society whose fundamental constitution both depends upon it and yet tends to discount or repudiate it.

Tocqueville writes that it was "the religious aspect of the country" that first struck him on his visit to America. In France, the Enlightenment had opposed religion to freedom; in America the two were inextricably joined. This, Tocqueville believes, is truer to man's essential nature:

> The short space of sixty years will never confine the whole imagination of man; the incomplete joys of this world will never suffice for his heart. Alone among all the beings, man shows a natural disgust for existence and an immense desire to exist: he scorns life and fears nothingness. These different instincts constantly drive his soul toward contemplation of another world, and it is religion that guides it there. Religion is therefore only a particular form of hope, and it is as natural to the human heart as hope itself. Only by a kind of aberration of the intellect and with the aid of a sort of moral violence exercised on their own nature do men stray from religious beliefs; an invincible inclination leads them back to them. Disbelief is an accident; faith alone is the permanent state of humanity.

Equality, the central democratic imperative, brings "great goods." But it also encourages a kind of spiritual isolationism (Tocqueville calls it "individualism") that tends to erode the binding force of religion. The result is a moral vertigo that exchanges freedom for unanchored worldliness.

> When authority in the matter of religion no longer exists . . . men are soon frightened at the aspect of this limitless independence. This perpetual agitation of all things makes them restless and fatigues them. . . . I doubt that man can ever support a complete religious independence and an entire political freedom at once; and I am brought to think that if he has no faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe.

Religion was an essential leavening ingredient in American democracy; the development of democracy encourages an unwitting "Cartesian" isolation that cuts men off not only from one another but also from their spiritual roots. What seems at first like the progress of freedom threatens to be a march into sterility. The origins of democracy thus not only allow us to predict its mature features but also supply an indispensable source of renewal.

Tocqueville's analysis of the superficialities to which democracy is heir has its complement in what we might call the masterpiece of his masterpiece, his analysis of democratic forms of oppression. There are two main forms, the tyranny of the majority and democratic despotism.

Majority rule is practically synonymous with democracy. But the majority can tyrannize not only over minorities, but also, more insidiously, over itself. The idea, Tocqueville writes, that "in matters of government the majority of a people has the right to do everything" is "impious and detestable." Although the origin of all political power in a democracy lies ultimately with the will of the majority, "justice . . . forms the boundary of each people's right." This means, for example, that one should not obey an unjust

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law. The "sovereignty of the human race" trumps the "sovereignty of a people" and provides a moral measure for majority rule. In American society, the tyranny of the majority shows itself above all in the tendency to delegitimize ideas not sanctioned by majority opinion. People are often surprised that Tocqueville should have remarked that "I do not know of any country where, in general, less independence of mind and genuine freedom of discussion reign than in America." After all, is not America the land of the free? But this restrictiveness, now as much as in the 1830s, is a predictable coefficient of the tyranny of the majority. "In America," Tocqueville notes, "the majority draws a formidable circle around thought. Inside those limits, the writer is free; but unhappiness awaits him if he dares to leave them. It is not that he has to fear an auto-da-fé, but he is the butt of mortifications of all kinds of persecutions every day." Here we have, *avant la lettre*, a definitive description of political correctness.

It was in his analysis of "democratic despotism" that Tocqueville, in Russell Kirk's words, made "his supreme achievement as a political theorist, a sociologist, a liberal, and a conservative." In two key chapters toward the end of volume two of of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville discusses the novel ways in which despotism would be likely to establish itself in democratic regimes. It would, he writes, be different from tyrannies of the past, which tended to be "violent but restricted." In democracies, despotism "would be more extensive and milder, and it would degrade men without tormenting them." The "individualism" that encourages democratic man to eschew political engagement and withdraw into himself and his private concerns —that "makes a public virtue of indifference"—also makes him susceptible to a "tutelary" despotism whose most insidious feature is its mildness.

> It would resemble paternal power if, like that, it had for its object to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary, it seeks only to keep them fixed irrevocably in childhood; it provides for their security, foresees and secures their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, regulates their estates, divides their inheritances; can it not take away from them entirely the trouble of thinking and the pain of living? . . . [This power] extends its arms over society as a whole; it covers its surface with a network of small, complicated, painstaking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot clear a way to surpass the crowd; it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and directs them; it rarely forces one to act, but it constantly opposes itself to one's acting; it does not destroy, it prevents things from being born; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.

If Tocqueville's analysis of the tyranny of the majority seems like a proleptic warning about political correctness, his discussion of democratic despotism sounds a pertinent tocsin about the encroachments of the nanny state. But here, too, Tocqueville's doubleness of vision reasserts itself. He is doubtless correct that, because "it is easier to establish an absolute and despotic government in a people where conditions are equal than in any other," despotism is particularly to be dreaded in democratic ages. Nevertheless, attempts to counter democratic despotism by resuscitating aristocracy are bound to fail. The task is not to struggle against the egalitarian imperative but to make "freedom issue from the bosom of the democratic society in which God makes us live." Equality is our fate, but it is up to us whether that equality "leads to servitude or freedom, to enlightenment or barbarism, to prosperity or misery." In this sense, the greatest danger we face is neither license nor tyranny, but the indifference, the "general apathy," that democracy nurtures but cannot long abide.

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Reticence or insincerity, Rattigan or Pinter

by Theodore Dalrymple

History is a seamless robe, of course, but there are nevertheless discernible tears in its fabric. One of these occurred in the 1950s, in the small world of the British theater. No doubt unimportant in itself, this quasi-revolution heralded, and perhaps even contributed to, a profound change in our culture.

The year in which the change started was 1956: the year, not coincidentally, of the Suez crisis, when it was unmistakably clear as never before that Britain, after two centuries of world influence, was now reduced to the status of a third-rate power, a kind of larger Belgium, which could disappear from the face of the earth without anyone beyond its shores noticing that anything very much had happened. Such abrupt losses of status are apt to result in a reduction of cultural self-confidence, both individually and collectively, as well as in a change of sensibility amounting to a gestalt switch. What previously appeared self-evidently good now appeared self-evidently bad, and vice-versa: and in the process, babies were thrown out with bathwater.

It was in 1956 that John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* was produced at the Royal Court Theatre in London. The living playwright who until then had dominated the London stage, Terence Rattigan, recognized it at once as a threat not merely to his commercial supremacy, but to his whole conception of the drama. Having attended the first night, Rattigan was asked by a newspaper reporter what he thought of the play. He replied that he thought Osborne was trying to say, "Look, Ma, I'm not Terence Rattigan." Accustomed from the early age of twenty-five to theatrical success, his long night of critical disdain had begun. He died if not an embittered, at least a very much saddened, man.

Osborne was not by any means the only playwright at work transforming the London stage. A couple of years after his triumph, another playwright, a young actor named Harold Pinter, had emerged. Within ten years his was perhaps the dominating presence in the English theater. And so distinctive was his work that, in a very short time, a new adjective came to describe the menacing atmosphere, heavily laden silences, and deep incomprehension between characters that were the hallmark of his plays: "Pinteresque." No doubt his name was admirably suited to the formation of adjectives, as Rattigan's name was not: for "Rattiganesque" or "Rattiganish" are clumsy, ugly locutions. But the remarkable fact is that, after the production of a mere handful of plays, many people who had never seen or read a work by Pinter knew precisely what the word "Pinteresque" meant. Such implicit recognition is given to very few authors, and is a sign of their cultural significance.

A comparison of Rattigan with Pinter might help us understand, or at least pinpoint, some of the enormous cultural

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changes that have occurred in England in the last half-century—and not only in England. It goes without saying that literary difference does not necessarily imply opposition: Chekhov is very different from Shakespeare, but in no sense opposed to him. And, despite their enormous differences, Rattigan and Pinter had a high regard for each other's work, which speaks well of them both. Among other things, they were united by a passion for cricket, that team sport so prolonged and subtle that there is little place for it in the modern world, except in India, where prolongation and subtlety remain in vogue.

Rattigan was the practitioner and advocate of "the well-made play," a phrase that came quite suddenly to bear precisely the opposite connotations from the ones a naïve speaker of our language might have supposed. The opposite of a well-made play being a badly made play (something which no sensible person, surely, would wish to waste his time or money on), the naïve speaker would conclude that the desirability of a play being well-made was unquestionable: but in fact, the phrase came to be code for trivial, facile, middlebrow entertainment, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and with little that, in the words of Mr. Podsnap, could call a blush to the cheek of a young person. In short, the well-made play was a typical product of English bourgeois complacency, hypocrisy, moral cowardice, and intellectual laziness.

Unfortunately, Rattigan did not help his own case by his invention of Aunt Edna, the notional average playgoer for whom, in the preface to the second volume of his collected plays published in 1953, he said he wrote his plays. Aunt Edna, according to Rattigan, was the kind of person who predominated in theater audiences the world over, and always would predominate, and whom the playwright could therefore ill afford to ignore or offend. Mildly interested in the arts, but not excessively so, Aunt Edna knew what she liked and knew even better what she did not like: morbid concentration on the unpleasant aspects of life to the exclusion of all else, artistic experimentation, and cleverness for its own sake.

Rattigan could hardly have expressed himself worse. What he meant, of course, was that he saw no reason why serious drama should not also be entertaining and accessible to all those with a modicum of intelligence. Plays could and should have different levels of meaning, with moral or philosophical depth being embedded in a coherent narrative. It was of this layering that the playwright's skill consisted.

But just as Mrs. Thatcher was hated by millions for her strident enunciation of ideas that she never actually put into practice, so Rattigan was condemned for a compromise with shallowness and complacency that he never actually made. On the contrary, his best plays were subtle explorations of human dilemmas and of the tragically destructive power of passion. Capable of evoking the most visceral of emotions from the smallest of events, his vision was a tragic one. He would have laughed at the idea of the perfectibility of life or of man.

It is not difficult to find the biographical source of his tragic vision. He was born in 1911 into an upper-middle-class family of Irish origin, his father having been a charming but rakish diplomat and his grandfather the chief justice of the Punjab and a noted legal scholar and linguist. Rattigan received the traditional education of his class and time; handsome and talented, he seemed to have the world at his feet.

But he was homosexual, and, while homosexuality was scarcely unknown or unpracticed at that or any other time, it was still legally proscribed and socially unacceptable. Deeply desirous of social success, he was obliged to conceal his true nature from the world: public revelation, he thought, would have been the ruin of his career. Moreover, he never told his much loved mother, who lived on well into his middle age, about his homosexuality, which she would have been unable to accept. He was therefore forced to lead a double life; he

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never allowed his homosexual lovers to live with him in case the mask slipped. Externally, therefore, he was the debonair and elegant English gentleman; internally, he was a man of unfulfilled longing for love and companionship. What he saw as a social obligation—the need to present a decorous façade to the world—frustrated his innermost desires. It was this personal experience of conflict between two powerful imperatives that gave him such insight into, and sympathy with, the broken human heart.

More recently, there have been attempts to turn Rattigan into a homosexual icon, as if his work were simply a disguised plea for homosexual liberation. Such a view of him is a symptom of the extreme balkanization of the imagination that has taken place since he wrote: as if the left-handed could really only understand the left-handed, and the blue-eyed speak only to the blue-eyed, et cetera. But while Rattigan's predicament was the psychological source of his tragic vision, his work was not dominated by resentment. His sympathies were not entirely with himself: for being a victim of circumstances was not yet a full-time occupation or a justification for having lived.

If he wasn't a campaigner for homosexual rights, exactly, Rattigan was made into a fierce social critic by an eminent British writer on the theater, Michael Billington, in his obituary of him in *The Guardian*. "His whole work," wrote Billington, "is a sustained assault on English middle class values: fear of emotional commitment, terror in the face of passion, apprehension about sex." This turns Rattigan into a theatrical advocate of sex education and a prophet of the Sixties sexual revolution, which is simply preposterous. The problem was that Billington, like most intellectuals, believed that all serious artistic work must, virtually by definition, assail middle-class values. (Could serious work assail proletarian values, for example, or uphold aristocratic ones?) Since Rattigan was, at his best, a serious artist, it followed therefore that he must have assailed middle-class values. But Rattigan was genuinely non-ideological: he believed that life was (or ought to be) too subtle and variable to be caught in the coarse-meshed net of theoretical principles.

Rattigan's plays do not lead to the conclusion that if only we could indulge in a little emotional incontinence everything would be all right. It is true that he once said, "Do you know what 'le vice anglais'—the English vice—really is? Not flagellation, not pederasty—whatever the French believe it to be. It's our refusal to admit our emotions." But we have already seen that his declarative statements are not necessarily the best guide to his deepest thought; and his plays certainly do not suggest that he would have regarded our modern mania for emotional openness and explicitness either as a positive contribution to civilization or as conducive to happiness. Quite the contrary: he was the poet of insolubility, who saw passion as unavoidable, necessary, and destructive at the same time.

Rattigan was certainly not a believer in the kind of confessional frankness and literal-mindedness that has swept the English speaking world since his apogee, and which has exerted such a coarsening effect upon our sensibility. In *Separate Tables*, for example, he makes a quiet case for reticence as a precondition for true tolerance. This play takes place in the dining room of the Beauregard Private Hotel, one of those residential hotels for retired gentlefolk who have come down in the world financially, which were once so plentiful in market towns and on the South Coast of England, and which called forth an entire literature of their own, offering authors a ready-made metaphor for both personal and national decline.

The principal residents of the hotel are Mrs. Railton-Bell, Lady Matheson, Major Pollock, and Mr. Fowler. Mrs. Railton-Bell has a daughter, Sybil, a timid creature whom she dominates entirely, and is herself a woman of implacably conventional and rigid social views, which she assumes that Lady Matheson, who is too polite to contradict her, shares.

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One day, through the pages of *The West Hampshire Weekly News*, Mrs. Railton-Bell discovers that Major Pollock is not a retired major at all, or a member of the upper middle class, but an impostor, a mere former lieutenant, and that he has appeared before the magistrates because he has indecently approached several women in a local cinema. It is clear that Mrs. Railton-Bell enjoys her righteous indignation as she makes her friend, Lady Matheson, read the item out loud:

> Lady Matheson (*reading*): Ex-officer bound over. Offence in cinema. (*Looking up.*) In cinema? Oh dear—do we really want to hear this?
> Mrs. Railton-Bell (*grimly*): Yes, we do. Go on.

Mrs. Railton-Bell says a little further on that she regards it as a stroke of luck that she had subscribed privately to *The West Hampshire Weekly News.*

> Lady Matheson: Luck, dear? Is it luck?
> Mrs. Railton-Bell: Of course it's luck. Otherwise we'd never have known.
> Lady Matheson: Wouldn't that have been better?

Lady Matheson's deceptively simple question implies a sophisticated understanding that a tolerable and tolerant life cannot be lived entirely in the open, and that civilized human relations cannot long survive an unwillingness to remain uninformed about the discreditable little episodes that mar each and every human life.

Mrs. Railton-Bell, having publicly exposed the major, calls a meeting of the residents to demand that the manageress of the hotel, Miss Cooper, expel the Major forthwith. Mr. Fowler, a former teacher of classics, initially agrees with Mrs. Railton-Bell: "Tolerance is not necessarily good, you know. Tolerance of evil may itself be an evil." But he also later recognizes an uncomfortable truth. "The trouble about being on the side of right, as one sees it, is that one sometimes finds oneself in the company of such very questionable allies." In the event, however, the manageress of the Beauregard refuses to expel Major (now plain Mr.) Pollock, and all the residents—except Mrs. Railton-Bell—accept him back into the fold. To the presumed satisfaction of the audience, Mrs. Railton-Bell's moral absolutism is defeated.

Rattigan is pleading for tolerance within a certain code of behavior. He is not suggesting that the standards by which the major was judged were in themselves wrong—that it is right for a man to manufacture a completely fake persona for himself, tell lies about his past, and touch up women in cinemas. But he is asking for the constant exercise of judgment rather than the mechanical application of rules, and his tolerance emerges not from abstract ideas, being neither ideological nor strident, but from genuine understanding of and sympathy for human weakness. The major explains himself to Sybil who—in her timid and inhibited way—has entertained an affection for him:

> I'm not trying to defend it [his behavior]. You wouldn't guess, I know, but ever since school I've always been scared to death of women. Of everyone, in a way, I suppose, but mainly of women. I had a bad time at school—which wasn't Wellington, of course—just a Council school. Boys hate other boys to be timid and shy, and they gave it me good and proper. My father despised me, too. He was a sergeant-major. He made me join the Army, but I was always a bitter disappointment to him. He died before I got my commission. I only got that by a wangle. It wasn't difficult at the beginning of the war. But it meant everything to me, all the same. Being saluted, being called sir—I thought I'm someone, now, a real person. Perhaps some woman might even—(*He stops.*) But it didn't work. It never has worked. I'm made a certain way, and I can't change it. It has to be the dark, you see, and strangers, because—

Sybil asks him to stop: she cannot bear

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more of his raw-nerve confession. But what is quite clear is that the major is not talking modern psychobabble: that genuine confession requires painful self-knowledge and is not possible for people who talk about themselves incontinently, or only as an egotistical conversational gambit.

In Rattigan, the ability of his characters to respond to others with genuine and intense emotion is intimately connected with their reticence. Early in *Separate Tables*, Sybil asks the major, who is then still playing his part as a bluff former officer of an elite regiment, whether he will accompany her on her walk.

> Major Pollock (*embarrassed*): Well, Miss R.B. —jolly nice suggestion and all that—the only thing is I'm going to call on a friend —you see—and—
>
> Sibyl (*more embarrassed than he*): Oh yes, yes. Of course. I'm so sorry.

In this little speech there is, for those attuned to hear it, the longing, despair, and loneliness of a lifetime, all disciplined by the need to conduct oneself properly in a social world. And in all of Rattigan's best plays—*The Deep Blue Sea*, *The Browning Version*, *The Winslow Boy*—there are conflicts between passion and good sense, between what is good for the individual and what is good for the collectivity, between duty and inclination. These conflicts are presented both entertainingly and truthfully, so that one ends with an understanding that civilization depends upon an endless interplay of incompatible desiderata, and that even the good life cannot be lived without unhappiness.

It is not difficult, however, to see how and why, after Rattigan's world of gentility and polite understatement, Pinter's plays made such an immense impact. His characters (at least in the first few plays) were drawn mainly from a lower social stratum than Rattigan's: which was in tune with the nascent intellectual fashion for believing that the unpolished and the brutal were somehow more real and authentic than the refined and the civilized. Ugliness was also henceforth more real than beauty and impoverishment more real than wealth. Pinter's audiences—which were, after all, still overwhelmingly drawn from the supposedly inauthentic middle classes—were enabled to imagine that they were immersing themselves in the *boue* for which they apparently had such a *nostalgie*. This was both pleasurable and, in their own eyes, the fulfillment of a moral duty. They believed they were bravely facing life as it is.

It was assumed at once that Pinter's depiction of the lower orders, as totally inarticulate, uncomprehending and uncouth, was true to life. In fact, many in the old working classes of England shared the values of reticence, restraint, and good manners with their social superiors: values that still exist among the older folk. For example, recently in the hospital in which I work, I happened to see the husband of a working-class patient of mine in a waiting room. In his seventies, he had lost a lot of weight since I saw him last, and he was deeply jaundiced. I knew at once that he had secondaries in his liver. I greeted him, and, when I inquired after his health, he replied with the utmost lack of drama, "I'm here for tests. It might not be very good news, I'm afraid." I wished him well, and saw him again a few days later in the same place. "It's not very good news," he said, meaning that he would be (as in fact he was) dead in two weeks. I said that I was sorry to hear it. "Well, we must make the best of it," he replied. Our dialogue was straight out of Rattigan.

He understood that I felt for him all the sorrow it is possible and reasonable for a stranger to feel for a fellow being: it required nothing other than a few simple words to establish it. Moreover, I understood that he, even in his extremity, was trying to spare my feelings, by not making a fuss. To the very end of his life, he was a social being with social obligations, with a true humility that was part of a profound moral framework. It was this framework

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that once made the English, for all their many faults, an admirable and sometimes a noble people: and it is the destruction of this framework that has turned them into such savages.

Pinter recorded the turning point and perhaps contributed to the change. Because of his skill, his plays hold our attention in the theater; he creates an atmosphere with a minimum of words and stage effects, and his verbal skill gives to his dialogue the quality (sometimes) of poetry. But before long, a certain intellectual thinness is evident, and we come to the realization that not only is there no explicit meaning in Pinter's plays, but there is no implicit meaning either.

In Rattigan, people do not say all that they think for reasons of social inhibition, in Pinter, both because they lack the words and because communication is in any case impossible. There is no doubt, of course, that many people—more than there used to be, thanks to modern educational methods—are inarticulate or that many people cannot stick to the point. If you listen to barroom conversations, it becomes clear that they do not always progress like Socratic dialogues. Verbosity and incoherence are by no means opposites: and intelligent conversation is at least as much a matter of omission as of inclusion. But the characters in Pinter's plays are inarticulate for a deeper reason; life for them lacks meaning because one moment is unconnected with another and because lack of meaning is inherent in all existence. In other words, there is simply no possibility of meaning. His characters are creatures of desire but no intellect; and therefore if disputes arise among them, they are mere struggles for power. When there are events—for example, the arrival on the stage of two thugs in *The Birthday Party*, Pinter's first full-length play—they are completely arbitrary and without explanation. This arbitrariness is ontological; for Pinter admits that he has no explanation for the events he himself has put into his plays.

There is a celebrated passage in the early play entitled *The Dumb Waiter* that illustrates the Pinteresque view of disagreement as a mere struggle for supremacy between the people who disagree. *The Dumb Waiter* is a typical Pinter play in that it takes place in an impoverished environment with characters whose names are simple diminutives (Ben and Gus), who have no memorable distinguishing features (one never gives a damn what happens to any Pinter character), and who are plunged into an arbitrarily enigmatic situation. They are hired killers who have come to an unoccupied room to await their unknown victim, a room in which—as it happens—there is a dumb waiter that unexpectedly delivers orders to them for various dishes. Ben and Gus, while waiting for their victim, would like a cup of tea. Ben—the senior of the two men—orders Gus to make it.

Ben (*powerfully*): If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.
Gus: How can you light a kettle?
Ben: It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech!
Gus: I've never heard it.
Ben: Light the kettle! It's common usage.
Gus: I think you've got it wrong.
Ben (*menacing*): What do you mean?
Gus: They say put on the kettle.
Ben (*taut*): Who says?
(*They stare at each other, breathing hard.*)
(*deliberately*): I've never in all my life heard anyone say put on the kettle.
Gus: I bet my mother used to say it.
Ben: Your mother? When did you last see your mother?
Gus: I don't know, about—
Ben: Well, what are you talking about your mother for?
(*They stare.*)
Gus, I'm not trying to be unreasonable. I'm just trying to point something out to you.
Gus: Yes, but—
Ben: Who's the senior partner here, you or me?
Gus: You.
Ben: I'm only looking after your interests, Gus. You've got to learn, mate.
Gus: Yes, but I've never heard—

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> Ben (*vehemently*): Nobody says light the gas! What does the gas light?
> Gus: What does the gas—
> Ben (*grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arms' length*): THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!

Clearly, the verbal disagreement—beautifully captured in rhythmical dialogue—is about nothing substantive. Ben is merely trying to crush Gus, to render him utterly subservient to him. This is a trick that Pinter often uses (one soon learns to recognize his devices that empty the world of meaning). In the first of his plays depicting educated middle-class people, *A Slight Ache*, an unhappily married couple argue over the question of whether a wasp bites or stings. The critic Martin Esslin used this play to illustrate Pinter's mastery not just of lower-class vernacular, but of educated middle-class speech also. In fact, it illustrates the opposite: his uncertain command at the time of middle-class speech. No educated middle-class person would maintain that wasps bite—to use such an expression would immediately establish one as an uneducated member of the lower classes. I checked that this was so with some friends, one of them a judge of the sharpest intellect. He immediately said, with legal precision, "Now if Pinter had used mosquitoes instead of wasps." The same kind of verbal power struggle appears in his late work, though suitably coarsened to appeal to the sensibility of the times: for example, whether a man should properly be called a cunt or a prick.

Obviously, verbal power struggles undoubtedly take place, and there is no reason why a playwright should not depict them. The problem with Pinter, however, is that this power struggle—verbal or otherwise—is almost all there is. His plays lack a moral dimension entirely. No situation poses a moral dilemma for any of the characters; no one speaks of any matter of principle. Everything in Pinter has the concreteness of the arbitrary.

Again, of course, there are people—alas, an increasing number of them, if my experience in medical practice is anything to go by—for whom life is like this. To take an example at random, I asked a young man recently who had smashed a man's skull with a fire extinguisher why he did it. "He was irritating me," he replied. "And how was he irritating you?," I asked. "He just was," replied the skull-crusher. He displayed no awareness that some people might think he had a duty to contain his irritation, and he likewise displayed no curiosity about the reasons that his victim had provoked so intense a reaction in him. As far as he was concerned, everything was as it was, and could have been no different from how it was. The givenness of the world was absolute and incontestable.

The exploration of this disastrous state of mind, that turns existence into a living hell, is a legitimate subject for literature. And Pinter's characters live in precisely this state. But there is something alarming about Pinter's use of them; he does not stand outside them, or criticize their brutally solipsistic world view. The lack of any other view in his plays suggests, indeed, that theirs is the only view possible.

Quite early on in his career, in 1962, Pinter gave a speech at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol in which he explained the lack of moral content in his plays.

> Warnings, sermons, admonitions, ideological exhortations, moral judgements, defined problems with built-in solutions. The attitude behind this sort of thing might be summed up in one phrase: "I'm telling you!" If I were to state any moral precept it might be: beware of the writer who puts forward his concern for you to embrace, who leaves you in no doubt of his worthiness, his usefulness, his altruism, who declares that his heart is in the right place, and ensures it can be seen in full view, a pulsating mass where his characters ought to be. What is presented, so much of the time, as a body of active and positive thought is in fact a body lost in a prison of empty definition and cliché.

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This is astonishingly crude, a mile away from the subtlety of Rattigan's moral sensibility. For Pinter, the choice is between Mr. Pecksniff and Elmer Gantry on the one hand and the kind of moral nihilism exhibited in his work on the other. But even if these were the only two possibilities in the world—which is quite clearly not the case—I would prefer Pecksniff to the nihilist; for if hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, at least it recognizes that there is a difference between the two.

There is something even more profoundly terrible in Pinter's work: a sustained attack on the power of the human intellect to impose order on experience or to make sense of existence. Although Pinter began his speech to the drama festival by declaring baldly "I'm not a theorist," he later said:

> Apart from any other consideration, we are faced with the immense difficulty, if not the impossibility, of verifying the past. I don't mean merely years ago, but yesterday, this morning. What took place, what was the nature of what took place, what happened? If one can speak of the difficulty of knowing what in fact took place yesterday, one can I think treat the present in the same way. What's happening now? We won't know until tomorrow or in six months' time, and we won't know then, we'll have forgotten, or our imagination will have attributed quite false characteristics to today. A moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the time of its birth.

Pinter is not a very good theorist perhaps, but he is a theorist nonetheless.

With this outlook, then, it is hardly surprising that his plays lack—indeed, deliberately eschew—a strong narrative line. And this cognitive nihilism is emphasized again and again in his work. Even in the dialogue quoted above, we can see it. Gus says not that his mother *did* say "Put the kettle on," but that he *bets* that she did, leaving open the distinct possibility that she did not. And if a son does not know his mother's verbal habits, who can know anything about anything?

In a world in which there is such radical uncertainty, such permanently shifting cognitive ground, such inescapable relativism, people behave psychopathically: they must do what they feel like at each successive instant not because it is right to do so, but because they could literally do no other. The question of right doesn't come into it. And there is little doubt that, during the period of Pinter's ascendance, our society has evolved according to such principles—if principles is quite the word I seek.

There is one further observation to make, however: on the complete dishonesty of it all. There is only one way to describe Pinter's philosophical outlook: that of a poseur. I refer not to the internal contradiction in his speech. (If we can't know the truth about any moment, how can we possibly say that any recollection of it is false?) Since we all commit errors of logic from time to time, Pinter may be forgiven on this count. What he cannot be forgiven for, in my opinion, is the brazenness of his insincerity. It is quite clear that he doesn't believe a word of what he says, and his reason for saying it must therefore be more concerned with self-advertisement and self-promotion that with a search for the truth. Pinter does not in the least believe it is impossible to know truths about the past. While many of his plays concern uncertainties about the events gone by—about the impossibility of knowing, for example, whether X really did commit adultery with Y—he exhibits no uncertainty about other aspects of the past. I doubt that he has ever been quite so sceptical about his royalty checks. And I now quote from an open letter by Pinter to Anthony Blair published in *The Guardian* on February 17, 1998.

> The US has supported, subsidized and, in a number of cases, engendered every right-wing military dictatorship in the world since 1945. I refer to Guatemala, Indonesia, Chile, Greece, Uruguay, the Philippines, Brazil, Paraguay,

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> Haiti, Turkey, El Salvador, for example. Hundreds of thousands of people have been murdered by these regimes but the money, the resources, the equipment (all kinds), the advice, the moral support, as it were, has come from successive US administrations.
>
> The deaths really do mount up: 170,000 in Guatemala, 200,000 in East Timor, 80,000 in El Salvador, 30,000 in Nicaragua, 500,000 in Indonesia—and that's just to be going on with. They are, every single one of them, attributable to your ally's foreign policy.

The point here is not of course whether Pinter is right or wrong (though having lived for some time in Central America, I came to the conclusion that Guatemalan soldiers knew how to burn down straw huts with flame throwers without much in the way of American tuition, to say nothing of the opposing revolutionary intelligentsia's distinct lack of enthusiasm for intellectual, economic, or political liberty as conventionally conceived). The point is that Pinter's open letter does not suggest a man who has much difficulty deciphering the past or making moral judgments about it. If it is possible to know that precisely 170,000 people were killed in Guatemala, and that the American government was responsible for all those deaths, it is surely possible to discover whether X committed adultery with Y. It is also possible to make some reasonable moral assessment of the adultery, if it occurred.

The displacement of Rattigan by Pinter (notwithstanding their relative and distinct talents) as the dominant force in British theater therefore represented the following social trends, *inter alia*: a coarsening of sensibility, the triumph of irrationalism, a scepticism about the ability of the human mind to order experience, a loss of faith in the ability of language to deliver meaning, a belief that only relations of power are real and all else is illusion, a slide into intellectual dishonesty and attitudinizing, and a tolerance of psychopathy. To what extent Pinter merely recorded the trends, and to what extent he actually promoted them, I cannot say. I suspect the relationship is what our friends the Marxists (when there were any) used to call "dialectical."

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Women & politics: Madame de Duras

by Renee Winegarten

You were made to rule the world.
—Chateaubriand to Mme de Duras

In 1786 the chevalier de Boufflers, then governor of Senegal, brought back for his aunt, the princesse de Beauvau, a black girl called Ourika, some two years old, who was going to be put on a slave ship. He made presents of other small black children, along with parakeets and monkeys, to various members of the French aristocracy. Mme de Beauvau later claimed to have loved her protégée as her own daughter, but the girl died when only about sixteen.

On a few facts like these, Mme de Duras (1777–1828)—one of the prominent influential political figures of the Bourbon Restoration—constructed her delicate and moving tale, *Ourika*, the great bestseller of 1823–24. Goethe much preferred it to the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Talleyrand told her he was lost in admiration for her art. Mme de Duras moved in the highest aristocratic circles close to those of Mme de Beauvau. An intimate friend of the author's, Mme de La Tour du Pin (who had been a lady-in-waiting to Queen Marie-Antoinette and who in the 1790s was reduced to farming near Albany with slaves) recalled in her memoirs how as a girl she had disliked having the original Ourika place "ebony" arms around her own "white" neck to please Mme de Beauvau.

In Mme de Duras's story, Ourika, well-educated and accomplished, at first appears thoroughly at ease. However, she overhears a conversation that destroys her security. A friend of her benefactress reproves the great lady for treating Ourika as a pet when there is no possibility for her to have a normal life in French society. For who will marry her? Ourika suffers torments of existential angst and self-hatred when she understands her true position. To add to her pain, her sadness is attributed to "guilty" love for the young man she has always regarded as her brother. The Revolution of 1789 raises Ourika's hopes of justice and equality but they are not fulfilled. When she turns towards those of her own color, she learns with horror about the massacres perpetrated by the slaves in revolt in Saint-Domingue. There is no way out for her. She retires to a convent where, despite the consolation of religion, she declines and dies. The tale exposes the frivolity and thoughtlessness of the aristocracy of the ancien régime, but underlying it there is a deeper sense of injustice in life itself to which Mme de Duras has no answer except the bitterness of grief.

Who was the author of this powerful and resonant tale of a happy childhood illusion that is shattered forever? At sixteen Claire de Kersaint, later duchesse de Duras, was in Bordeaux, one of the five major French slave-trading ports, when she learned from the shouts of a street newsvendor that her adored father, the comte de Kersaint, a great naval hero and reformer, had perished by the guillotine on 5 December 1793. She was

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in Bordeaux with her mother, who had been born in Martinique, because they were preparing to take ship for the New World.

Many years later, in *Les Mémoires de Sophie*, she wrote:

> Those who witnessed the Terror in their youth have never experienced the gaiety of their forebears, and will carry to the tomb the premature melancholy that gripped their spirit.

She herself would never manage to escape for long from feelings of sorrow and disillusion fostered by her penetrating insight into the darker aspects of human character. She knew for herself the sense of isolation and estrangement, even of uselessness, that she gave to Ourika. Alluding to society, Mme de Duras once declared (long before Camus): "I do not know what I am doing in that place where I feel so deeply that I am an outsider (*étrangère*)." The questions she raises so tellingly in her original and controversial tales, questions of race, color, identity, and alienation in *Ourika*, of social inequality and injustice in *Edouard*, of impotence in *Olivier ou le Secret*—these are as alive today (if in different forms) as they were in French society before and during the Revolution and after the restoration of the Bourbons in 1814–15.

It is not only for her claims as a talented writer, seized by a relatively brief upsurge of artistic creativity, that she deserves to be better known, but also for her vital part in promoting the political career of François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848). He and Mme de Staël shone as the two major French literary luminaries of the age. In his fascinating autobiography, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (nowadays frequently qualified as the best of his novels on account of its numerous departures from strict accuracy), Chateaubriand acknowledged the unique role of Mme de Duras in furthering his political ambitions. He observed complacently: "she alone first recognized what valuable qualities I could bring to politics." Her contribution, however, would not be achieved without her suffering a good deal of anguish that does not really percolate through the beautifully eloquent phrases of admiration, self-accusation, and easy regret that Chateaubriand wrote after her death.

As regards political principle, throughout her life this gifted woman remained loyal to the memory of her highly cultivated liberal-minded father. Scion of an ancient noble family of Brittany, Kersaint helped to keep open the sea-lanes for commerce with France during the American War of Independence and also became deeply involved in French revolutionary politics. While engaged in the defense of Martinique, he had married the governor's first cousin, a lady of considerable wealth. Consequently, he had firsthand knowledge of slavery and the slave trade upon which his wife's—and now his own—fortune depended. Later, Kersaint pleaded the cause of the blacks. His liberal outlook may be regarded as relative today but it was certainly a vast improvement on the attitude of diehard slaveholders.

An ardent polemicist, the idealistic Kersaint attacked privileges in a pamphlet entitled—possibly after Tom Paine's—*Le Bon Sens* ("Common Sense"). When elected a deputy to the Legislative Assembly, he associated with the Girondins. Horrified by the massacres of September 1792, he resigned because he could not bear to sit with "the men of blood." He was among the courageous few who opposed the death penalty for Louis XVI. Claire de Kersaint inherited her father's courage and strong independence of mind. She saw that there was no possibility of turning back the clock as the extreme royalists or *ultras* proposed. Like him, she would remain a convinced liberal constitutional monarchist—though unsparing in her criticism of royalist folly and error.

In the New World in 1794–95, Claire and her mother stayed first in Philadelphia, and then in Martinique. Since her mother was apparently quite incapable, the young girl dealt with matters concerning the recovery of family property on the island. In 1795 they travelled to Switzerland and then to

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London where they joined the community of French émigrés whose frivolity and foolish optimism she later depicted with a cool eye. Some of them viewed her askance as the daughter of a Girondin. Unlike her, many of them were living in very reduced circumstances. Among them was Amédée, duc de Durfort, afterwards duc de Duras, who (it is widely hinted) married her for her fortune in 1797. Mme de Duras had great dark eyes and dark hair. In an age that worshipped pale classical beauties like Pauline Bonaparte and Juliette Récamier, she believed that she was ugly. One of her sharp-tongued contemporaries, Mme de Boigne, author of penetrating memoirs, thought her feelings on the subject of her appearance to be exaggerated. Yet this disquiet about her looks goes some way to explain her profound empathy with the sensibility of a black girl like Ourika, brought up in a society where all too often blackness was equated with ugliness.

Claire's husband, the duc de Duras, issued from one of the most illustrious Breton aristocratic families, which by tradition occupied the coveted post of *Premier Gentilhomme de la Chambre*, one of the four highly privileged officials of the Court who were closest to the king, saw him every day, and ushered into the royal presence those individuals who were granted an audience. The duc de Duras, intensely loyal to the martyred king's brother, Louis XVIII, in his long exile at Mittau and at Hartwell House near Aylesbury, naturally acted in this capacity on the Bourbon monarch's return to Paris in 1814. Unlike many French aristocrats, he had declined to serve at the Court of the Emperor Napoleon and had preferred to live quietly at the beautiful château d'Ussé, purchased partly from his wife's funds. During the Hundred Days of Napoleon's astonishing return from Elba, he and his wife loyally followed Louis XVIII into exile at Ghent where, to her great sorrow mingled with guilt, her mother died.

The duc de Duras was said to be "more of a duke" than the egregious duc de Saint-Simon (famed through his memoirs as a fanatical stickler for niceties of rank). His wife, to her misfortune (observed her friend Mme de La Tour du Pin), fell in love with him. Mme de Duras, in a letter to her husband written from Paris where she had traveled on family business in 1800, raised timorously the question of their addressing each other by the familiar "tu," while she wrote to him still using the more formal "vous."

> Will you forgive me, my dear Amédée, for speaking to you with such familiarity? I know you do not care for it, but I need it . . . it reminds me of our tête-à-tête when I ventured to use it.

By then they were the parents of two daughters, Félicie and Clara. The duc de Duras's model was possibly the king himself, for Louis XVIII (who had no offspring) scarcely ever employed the familiar form even to his brother, the future Charles X, or the other members of his family, though he did use it in private letters to his favorite, Decazes, whom he treated as his son.

It was obvious to all who met the couple that they were not compatible and that she was his intellectual superior. Rosalie de Constant, who was to correspond with Mme de Duras for many years, knew them well when they were staying in Lausanne in 1805. Benjamin Constant's highly intelligent unmarried cousin noted in her diary that while Mme de Duras loved botanizing (like herself) and thrilled to mountain scenery, her husband spent all his time hunting. When it dawned on Mme de Duras, with her passionate and demanding nature, that her more formal husband was not a kindred spirit, she concentrated her affections on her daughters, doting especially on Félicie. (This would prove to be an unfortunate choice, because Félicie de La Rochejaquelein would prefer her second husband's family—famous for its heroic leadership of the counterrevolutionary uprising in the Vendée—to her own. She became a convinced and active *ultra*, much to the grief of

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her liberal mother.) Eventually, in a perfectly amicable manner, the duc and duchesse de Duras followed their separate inclinations. Through increasing ill health, she would be allowed to withdraw from the tedious obligations of social life at Court that was his favored milieu. All the same, she could exert considerable political influence through her husband who was in daily contact with the king.

The society of the Bourbon Restoration was highly politicized. This was the era when the foundations of modern French parliamentary life under the *Charte* or Charter of 1814 were being precariously established. According to the poet (and future liberal leader) Lamartine in 1823, "nowadays only the subject of politics arouses interest." It was also the age of great political salons, each with its own recognized loyalty and nuance. Anyone with pretensions to thought was passionately concerned with the Revolution that had overturned everything and whose consequences—for good or ill—could not be eluded. In an era of dazzling salons (like those governed by Mme de Staël or Mme Récamier), the salon of Mme de Duras was seen as both brilliant and powerful. So important was it that she merited a polite rebuke from the chief minister, the duc de Richelieu (formerly governor of Odessa), who advised her to moderate the opposition to his policies expressed in her salon.

Her gatherings could be found either in her mansion in the rue de Varenne in the faubourg Saint-Germain or in the palaces of the Tuileries or Saint-Cloud where the duc de Duras enjoyed grace-and-favor apartments. Among its habitués were princes, diplomats, political leaders, savants and writers: the Duke of Wellington and Talleyrand; the Corsican-born Russian ambassador Pozzo di Borgo; Lord Stuart, the English ambassador; the eminent scholar-explorer Alexander von Humboldt; the groundbreaking palaeontologist Georges Cuvier; the poet Delphine Gay; and Abel-François Villemain, the distinguished academic and literary critic. Stendhal keenly followed Mme de Duras's trajectory, proposing to send her a copy of his *De l'Amour* while listing her quite unjustly with "*les catins à la mode*" ("fashionable trollops"), perhaps because as a well-known Bonapartist he could never gain access to her royalist salon.

Mme de Duras, familiar with English literature, was extremely well read—there were nearly two-thousand volumes in her library at Ussé. She was curious about everything, judging with discrimination the latest publications and talents. She admired Mme de Staël whom she had met briefly in Lausanne, and she was distressed by Napoleon's persecution of the author of *Corinne*. After returning to Paris in 1814, Mme de Staël became a warm friend, and she was to be found expressing esteem for what she called Mme de Duras's singular "naturalness in an artificial society." They corresponded (keeping an eye on the censorship) mostly on current political affairs, the dire state of the nation and its prospects, up to Madame de Staël's death in 1817.

Among the contemporary writers Mme de Duras most admired was Chateaubriand, a fellow Breton, nine years her senior (whose somber father had once commanded a slave ship). One summer evening, on the terrace overlooking the forest of Saint-Germain, Mme de Duras spoke passionately in defense of *Les Martyrs*, his epic novel on the clash of Christianity and paganism under imperial Rome that is little read today. According to Villemain, who was present, she declared that Chateaubriand "evokes our misfortunes, our bereavements, the martyrs of our own day," as well as the faith and heroic fortitude shown on the scaffold in the face of the pagan executioners. "Are not these the same virtues as those of our brothers, our fathers, put to death in the public square for their God and their king?" Villemain recalled her forceful tone of grief, which moved her hearers "like the very names of Malesherbes and Kersaint," as he underlined her meaning.

She had become acquainted with Cha-

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teaubriand in 1808 (although both of them had been émigrés in London), through Nathalie, duchesse de Noailles, her husband's beautiful and gifted cousin by marriage, who was then Chateaubriand's mistress. It was Mme de Noailles who would collapse into madness like the heroine of Mme de Duras's *Olivier ou le Secret*, surviving for many years in oblivion. On hearing the news of his onetime lover's tragic decline, Chateaubriand wrote to Mme de Duras, "What an ill fate pursues me!" This cry is typical of the self-regarding writer, fond of striking poses, who was as much an example of "the Egotistical Sublime" as Wordsworth, his close contemporary.

Soon Chateaubriand and Mme de Duras were addressing each other as "dear brother" and "dear sister." They went for long walks together along tree-lined boulevards. He would call on her for private talks, appearing only rarely in her salon. Tongues began to wag. Her candid friend, Mme de La Tour du Pin, pointed out to her that what she was feeling for Chateaubriand, with his notorious "seraglio," was not friendship as she deluded herself, but love. Hurt and outraged, Mme de Duras broke with Mme de La Tour du Pin (who became ever more closely attached to Mme de Duras's estranged daughter, Félicie), and they were not to be reconciled until Mme de Duras's last illness. According to Stendhal, who claimed that he wanted a plain style in conformity with the Napoleonic Code, Chateaubriand was "an arch hypocrite and maker of sonorous phrases." But what phrases! Who can forget his picture of the corrupt Talleyrand and the regicide Fouché as "Vice leaning on the arm of Crime"? The poetic musicality of his prose, those sensuous depictions of moonlit nights in distant climes, proved irresistibly hypnotic to many—especially his female readers, much to the sardonic amusement of his long-suffering wife. How often he told each of his adoring women in turn that he was hers forever, assuring her that he would give his life for her! He was known as "*l'Enchanteur*," the irresistible charmer. According to Villemain, his first biographer, he was also a man of glacial pride, and at times when in society would totally withdraw into his own thoughts.

After years of intense literary fame, Chateaubriand (who had once been secretary to the French legation in Rome) decided that he wanted to pursue a serious political career. He could then prove to everyone that a man of letters could be just as successful in politics as all those he considered his intellectual and moral inferiors. Chateaubriand was to become the role model of the writer-as-politician for Lamartine, Victor Hugo, and the rest—an outcome for which Mme de Duras might bear some responsibility. In the early days of their association Chateaubriand discussed his ambitions with her. He was not well-to-do and he lacked the essential contacts with the powerful that she could readily provide. She lent him money to settle his debts, knowing well that she would never see it returned. With her knowledge of the Court, where small things counted for much, she advised him how to conduct himself with patient discretion, how to flatter Louis XVIII who disapproved of men of letters in political life. She urged Chateaubriand when he was in England to visit Hartwell House and to write to the king about it, with one or two quotations from Horace, the monarch's favorite poet. The duc de Duras saw that this missive came into the king's hands.

It was she who managed to have Chateaubriand restored to his position as minister of state, which he had formerly lost along with its invaluable pension by giving offense to the monarch. Through her he rose to be a peer. She passionately argued his merits and suitability for office with leading ministers like Talleyrand, Blacas, and Pasquier. She besieged Villèle, then chief minister, putting Chateaubriand's interests before those of her own family. Through her interventions on his behalf she contrived to have Chateaubriand appointed minister plenipotentiary to Berlin (he was not satisfied with the Swedish embassy

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when it was proposed) and then ambassador to London (where he could savor the contrast between his present eminence and his former obscurity as an émigré). It was largely through her considerable efforts that he was sent as French representative to the Congress of Verona where he impressed Tsar Alexander I, Metternich, and other leading European notabilities. When he rose to be minister of foreign affairs in 1822–24, she uttered a cry of triumph. "My dream for you is fulfilled," she assured him.

What is extraordinary is his tone whenever things do not seem to him to be going to his liking. It is not at all the accent of customary elegant French *politesse* and it does not accord with the noble loftiness that characterizes his stance in his writings. On the contrary, it is the pressing urgency of his demands, the unjust accusations (for instance, the suspicion that she is lukewarm and failing to devote her full attention to his cause), and the intemperate reproaches that astonish by their violence. He is peremptory: "See to negotiations," "Intervene with Talleyrand," "Stick to your guns," "Settle everything with Villèle." When he was posted abroad she sent him in her letters details of political events at home so that he could continue to keep abreast of affairs in France.

If Mme de Duras ever expected gratitude for the many years of preferring his interests to her own, she did not find it. Nor did he show her sympathy or understanding when she was gravely ill. "M. de Chateaubriand will only believe that I am ill when I am dead," she told Rosalie de Constant bitterly. By the time she had succeeded in her many struggles on his behalf, Chateaubriand was no longer as ingratiating as when she first knew him. She reminded him—rather tactlessly—that she preferred him when he had been "poor and persecuted." In those days when he needed her, he was a man of simple tastes who professed to wish to retire to the country to enjoy a quiet life (a favorite refrain of his). Somehow he had grown convinced that he alone had accomplished his rise. As he coolly wrote to her from his London embassy, "I am not without some vanity at having created this destiny myself." When in Paris he no longer accompanied her on delightful walks or paid his eagerly awaited morning call. On occasional brief visits to her, he would sometimes pace the room in silence, frowning, so that she felt afraid of offending him.

It did not take long, though, before she discovered that he was now assiduously attending the salon of Mme Récamier (whom he had met again, after many years, at Mme de Staël's in 1817) and to whom he would remain publicly faithful—in his fashion—to the end of his life in 1848. This new liaison he had tried in vain to keep secret from Mme de Duras. Her passionate reproaches and snide allusions to his new commitment did not serve her well. He told Mme Récamier, who was also using her influence on his behalf, that the lady was "half mad", and he spoke of her "cries of jealousy" and her "rages." To add insult to injury, he informed his "dear sister" that it was "only on political matters" that she appeared reasonable.

Mme de Duras was shattered by his betrayal. She had fed on the illusion that their friendship was as unique in his life as it was in hers. This disillusion completed the earlier disappointment she had felt at her husband's indifference and Félicie's disloyalty. She went for walks alone. Missing Chateaubriand's morning visits, she stopped the clocks in her drawing room. Yet she continued to serve his interests devotedly as a faithful friend whereas doubtless it was ambition that made him endure her criticism.

Meanwhile serious political differences arose between them. Mme de Duras always urged patience and moderation. "I loathe exaggerated and violent opinions," she once declared. She detested most *ultras*, and especially their political use of religion. It seemed to her that Chateaubriand was veering ever more to the right and she did not want him to become the leader of an extremist party. One grave source of contention occurred when Chateaubriand favored intervention in Spain to subdue the

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liberal uprising and reinstate the Bourbon king. She could not fail to recall how in 1808 Napoleon's invasion of Spain had cost France dear. Certainly she did not think it was wise to risk such casualties again, in order to restore a "horrible" absolutist monarch like Ferdinand VII, "so despicable and so despised." Besides, she was sure that the French people were against such a course.

Chateaubriand, however, was eager for honor and glory. In his opinion, her heart was ruling her head. He condescended to assure her that war and peace present considerations of advantage and disadvantage that only a statesman can weigh. His primary concern (anticipating that of General de Gaulle) lay with France's military standing in Europe, and with the country's rank as a first-class power, especially after the bitter humiliation of defeat at Waterloo and costly occupation by the Allies. Victory in Spain would restore France to her rightful place. Besides, with the crushing of the Spanish revolt, "we shall be finished with Jacobinism for ever," he informed her. It seems unlikely that she shared this vain hope.

In principle, Mme de Duras was touched by social as well as political advances brought about by the French Revolution. She expressed deep sympathy for "the poor people," sympathy that was not at all common in those of her rank. For her husband the lower orders were still "la canaille." Sensitive farmers and loyal retainers appear in her fiction. In her view, some liberal politicians were merely using words like "the people" when they claimed that the poor were ardent adherents of the *Charte*; for as she well knew, the indigent were far more interested in finding bread. Yet whatever her own liberal views, she herself preserved a strong sense of the immutability of rank as well as of the profound suffering caused by this inflexibility. She felt that people are probably better off if they can stay in their place. To her daughter Clara, Mme de Duras had written from Compiègne, where she had witnessed shabby examples of blatant *arrivisme* on Louis XVIII's return in 1814, "My dear child, whatever your position in life, adopt the firm resolve to remain in your station, neither above nor below." The bourgeois hero's mother in *Edouard* expresses the same sentiment. Moreover, Mme de Duras and her husband would not accept a respectable young lawyer as Clara's suitor.

In the remarkable *Edouard* (1825), Mme de Duras elaborated this very theme. She liked to place her fiction at a remove, in the ancien régime. Noble-hearted but bourgeois Edouard, son of an eminent lawyer, falls in love with the daughter of his magnanimous aristocratic protector, a love that is reciprocated. A nobleman thoughtlessly voices the belief that she is Edouard's mistress. Outraged, Edouard challenges him to a duel, but to his intense distress the challenge is refused because the nobleman claims he cannot fight with a bourgeois. Unable to restore his beloved's reputation, Edouard in despair seeks death by leaving France to fight for American independence. Mme de La Tour du Pin, who never forgot that she had been lady-in-waiting to the queen, resentfully criticized both novelist and subject matter, declaring that "nothing is so ill-considered as to say all of that at the present time. She belittles the aristocracy and inflames the other class." The novel's relevance to the inequality and social injustice of the author's own day is manifest.

Mme de Duras had plainly struck a nerve with her yearning for meritocracy, which she thought existed in England and the United States. That desire is evident throughout the book. The author's cousin, the duc de Lévis, who had flourished in the grand social milieu of the ancien régime that she depicted in the novel, queried the scene of the ball attended by the queen, where the aristocratic heroine chooses to dance with Edouard. This scene was quite impossible, averred Lévis, because the nobility would have been dressed in regulation courtly finery whereas Edouard would have been recognized at once by his very clothes as a mere bourgeois, condemned by "the original sin of the inequality of rank." The

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duc de Lévis, though questioning the detail, nonetheless confirms with this strikingly potent phrase the author's main contention in her novel: the gross injustice of the social inequality that had been attacked by her father.

Still, Mme de Duras was the victim of her own contradictions. For instance, she was not writing primarily about slavery in *Ourika*—although the debate about the slave trade was renewed in the 1820s—but about individual estrangement. Doubtless she sympathized with the abolitionist stance of Mme de Staël, a friend of Wilberforce, but her own wealth derived from slave plantations in Martinique. Whatever her intense detestation of social inequality and her awareness of its deleterious consequences, she certainly could not permit her daughter to marry beneath her, given not only her own position in society but also the rigid attitudes of her class.

She chose themes that were bold for a woman of her era. In *Olivier ou le Secret*—which was not published until 1971, by which time part of it was lost—she deliberately selected the "challenge" of an "impossible" subject: sexual impotence. The novel was read only to a few habitués of her salon but inevitably word of it seeped out. Stendhal, obsessed with what he liked to call the "*fiasco*," took up the "challenge" with his first novel, *Armance*. Mme de Duras's delicate hints pale before Stendhal's more obvious clues to sexual impotence in *Armance*, just as his scabrous remarks on the subject addressed to his good-time companion, Prosper Mérimée, far exceed anything that she could have written as a woman of refinement.

Ultimately, the sexual impotence in *Olivier ou le Secret* serves as a metaphor, leaving an impression of impotence in general that culminates in the suicide of the hero and the insanity of his beloved. Mme de Duras had the imagination and the daring to challenge in her writings the boundaries of her day within which she felt herself to be confined. "Alas, this world is woven of chains, and the strongest and most independent character is bound by countless immovable considerations," she wrote to Mme de Staël. A sense of overwhelming powerlessness marks the resonant fiction of Mme de Duras who nonetheless quite openly—and without any dispute among the leading masculine figures of the day—forcefully exerted political influence and power.

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The fortunes of Aby Warburg

by J. Duncan Berry

When conflicting worldviews kindle partisan emotions, setting members of a society at each other's throats, the social fabric inexorably crumbles; but when those views hold a balance within a single individual—when, instead of destroying each other, they fertilize each other and expand the whole range of the personality—then they are powers that lead to the noblest achievements of civilization.
—Aby Warburg, 1902

What does it mean when representatives of a previous generation's art historical scholarship are published and offered to the public anew? This has become an increasingly important question because a number of academic publishers here and abroad are risking precious capital on bringing out such works, many of which were originally undertaken well over a century ago. In the last half-decade alone there have appeared two major works by Alois Riegl (in both fresh German editions and in English translations); a lively theoretical survey from 1905 by August Schmarsow; Julius von Schlosser's fascinating 1910 essay on wax portraiture (in both German and French); Paul Frankl's thousand-page-plus magnum opus, *System der Kunstwissenschaft*; as well as several early works by Erwin Panofsky, including the exquisite *Hercules at the Crossroads* (again, in German and French translation). Obvious dangers include the thorny issue of incorporating, or at least acknowledging, subsequent research on fundamental issues such as dating and attribution, and the question of the value of opening often long-settled disputes. One immediately thinks of Panofsky's own desire to emblazon "CAVTIVS" on the dust jacket of the 1960 reissue of his 1924 *Idea*.

Given the manifest leftward tilt of humanistic study as a whole over the last two decades, one can safely assume that many such titles have been trotted out as exemplars from which further ideological mining can be expected. Still, they may also be brought forth as legitimations of current depredations, to which the germ of current follies can be traced, given the imprimatur of a nonideological pedigree, and eventually extended into other domains. I have already discussed one instance of this a few years ago in this journal.[1] As I suggested then, genuine scholarship, unmotivated by ideology, often frustrates the ideologue's desire for validation or redemption because, quite simply, ideology and desire invariably thwart the perception of fact.

It is therefore somewhat disheartening that what should be regarded as a genuine triumph of modern academic publishing—the reissue of Aby Warburg's collected publications and their translation into English—had to be presented in leftish ideological wrappers in both instances.[2]

1 See "'Style'—of Whatever" on the reissue of Alois Riegl's *Problems of Style* in *The New Criterion* (April 1993).

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Aby Warburg (1866–1929) was the scion of a distinguished Hamburg-based banking family, whose extensive history has been lovingly told by Ron Chernow. Turning away from the family business as a youth, Aby traded his birthright to a younger brother under the proviso that the firm fund his library, offer him the life of an independent scholar and, ultimately, build the research institute that, now in London, still bears the family name. Despite his repeated refusals to accept an academic position, Warburg was a tireless worker during the early years of this century, providing the organizational talent for the discipline's first international congress while turning out a series of stunning articles on a wide range of Renaissance subjects. Though his curiosity about the wellsprings of artistic activity was wide-ranging, he was never able to develop these concerns in a sustained manner. This inevitably gives the oeuvre a fragmentary, even fitful appearance. It is an oeuvre whose very incompleteness nevertheless renders it extremely suggestive to this day. For the introduction of the 1966 Italian translation of the major essays, Warburg's assistant Gertrude Bing wrote that

> All over his writings there are the traces of wreckage: projects not carried out, promises of articles, the variety of theme is perplexing. The spread of scholarly curiosity is so wide as to obscure the red thread of a leading interest.

It is thus somewhat odd that Warburg came to be seen as the epitome of a monolithic school of art historical work. The "Warburgian" method has been variously described, but centers on the notion of iconology, a notoriously subtle branch of art historical inquiry akin to the more familiar area of iconography. Iconographic research is essentially a form of literary detective work in which the textual sources for figural representations are identified, allowing one to distinguish a pictorial theme. Iconology, strictly considered, is a kind of "meta-iconography," in which attention is given to the program supporting the various themes in a pictorial cycle. Very few such programs predate the middle of the sixteenth century. In order to undertake strict iconological analysis, one must possess firm convictions as to what kinds of programs were possible in any given historical circumstance so that one may plausibly argue for or against a given interpretation in the absence of dispositive documentary evidence.

There also happens to be a less-than-strict variant of iconology which became extremely influential in this country due to the vast erudition, personal charm, and energy of Erwin Panofsky. He developed his variant squarely on the shoulders of Warburg's achievement and within the walls of his library. When he emigrated to the United States in the early 1930s, Panofsky brought a heady mixture of theoretical interests in which an historicist predilection for Rieglian abstraction was grafted onto Warburg's capacity to master an enormous fund of literature—classical, biblical, astrological, theological, academic, and speculative. By 1939, in the "Introductory" to his *Studies in Iconology*, Panofsky defined the method's objectives as "ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion—unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work." But an unusually well-developed Teutonic scholarly apparatus masked the treacherous Hegelian undercurrents in Panofsky's brand of expansive iconology. While very few contemporaries dared critique his assumptions, there were some who pointed out that all his erudition

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2 *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, by Aby Warburg, translated by David Britt; The Getty Research Institute, 868 pages, $75.

Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike: Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der europäischen Renaissance, by Aby Warburg. Gesammelte Schriften. Studien Ausgabe. Erste Abteilung, Band 1.1 & 1.2; Akademie Verlag, 1998.

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often led to simplistic conclusions. Of course, there can be real political value to such generalizations (Ike's "conformist" Fifties vs. Kennedy's "elegant" Camelot), and Panofsky's brand of iconology was an academic exercise that tended to support the transformation of information into propaganda for an increasingly visual age.

Dieter Wuttke has noted with great perspicacity that "Warburg was not only concerned with questions of content and signification, but at the same time offered a contribution to the form problem as well," particularly in his 1894 dissertation on Sandro Botticelli. In reading Warburg's published writings *in toto*, one rightly returns to Bing's question of a scarlet thread. I believe that Philip-Alain Michaud's recent book, *Aby Warburg et l'image en mouvement* (Paris, 1998), offers a timely and workable response. Around 1902, Michaud argues, Warburg's concerns over the interaction of form, content, and symbolic expression fused into an "activist" conception of art history. He was "no longer satisfied simply to observe and comprehend historical phenomena, but rather he wanted to reproduce or resuscitate them in a manner that demolished the division between a given representation and its interpretation." In short, Warburg's task was not to present a contemporary account but to offer instead a seamless screen upon which the historical datum could speak for itself through the images. And this he accomplished time and again with poise, verve, and great wit. His careful crafting of any given topic demonstrates just how thoroughly he had conquered the documentary and archival sources required even to conceive the question. In the entirety of art historical literature, is there a more elegant, gentlemanly, and transparent definition of an art historical problem than in the opening pages of his study on "The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie" from 1902?

By contrast, it can be fairly said that Warburg's principal rivals were content to offer suggestive historical explanations of stylistic shifts that were unabashedly anchored in turn-of-the-century formalism. These explanations should now be regarded as circular confirmations of the theory. This is especially true of Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin, both of whom were obsessed by the "discovery" of universal historical laws that worked through individuals and across generations like the genetic formulæ for red hair or green eyes. Their goal was to understand discrete historical essences: hence Wölfflin's celebrated "high" Renaissance, or Riegl's late Roman *Kunstwollen*. By contrast, Warburg concluded his 1912 lecture on the astrological themes of the frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia by declaring that

> our young discipline blocks its own panoramic view of history. It gropes toward an evolutionary theory of its own, somewhere between the schematisms of political history and the dogmatic faith in genres.

Warburg dared treat "the ancient, medieval, and modern worlds as a coherent historical unity . . . and cast light on great and universal evolutionary processes in all their interconnectedness." In other words, he viewed the human mind as a unified entity, capable of transcending historical categorization. He offered as evidence the capacity of one age (the Renaissance) to digest and employ the symbolical apparatus of another (ancient astral mythology) as modified by the exigencies of a third (Arabic astrology). The 1912 lecture remains one of the most compelling demonstrations of the viability of his program—the survival (*Nachleben*) of pagan antiquity.

For their part, Riegl and Wölfflin took a more explicitly historicist approach, satisfying themselves by exploring the collective processes at work in the appearance of a given historical object, processes that simply reflected the "theory" behind the question being posed. While their research methods continue to cast new light on numerous stylistic issues for the novice, they—like most collectivists—mistook the light source (theory) for its reflection (actuality). One

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area of interest that Warburg did share with Riegl, and which has apparently escaped most modern Warburg readers, is the significance of the attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*) internal figures in paintings pay to one another as well as to the spectator. An interlocking web of glances, and the implied hierarchy thereby established, constitutes a layer of social activity that has become increasingly subject to so-called "reception theorists" within art history who seek to draw out class distinctions and the like. In Warburg's hands, though, this type of scrutiny is imbued with a much higher purpose beginning with his early Botticelli studies and carrying on through to the piece on the cross-fertilizations between Flemish and Florentine art.

The only scholar of that generation whose work compares favorably with Warburg's on this score is Wilhelm Vöge. A reprint of his 1894 masterpiece on the beginnings of the "monumental style" in Gothic sculpture is available. Like Warburg, Vöge balanced his inquiry with due consideration of the force of, for want of a better term, human agency. Vöge's main contribution was a brand of *Stilkritik* ("stylistic analysis") in which exhaustive visual scrutiny of the most minute traces of the manual working of an object, primarily medieval sculpture, could yield concrete information about individual hands in a notoriously anonymous medium. In its day, it was perhaps the most methodical application of connoisseurship in the service of art history that had ever been undertaken. This kind of methodological individualism allows the work to illuminate itself. Vöge's concerns were, however, far more limited than Warburg's. By anchoring each wide-ranging quest to concrete individual conditions, Warburg became the master of a luminous and humane art history. Although some derivations or attributions have since been refuted, the warm glow of human aspirations and sufferings still beams from his prose.

And, as in Riegl's and Wölfflin's work, there is a whiff of the aesthete's fussiness in Vöge's writing that is absent in Warburg. It is the kind of fussiness that makes one recall the neurotic habits of another member of this generational cohort whose work, while quite popular during his own lifetime, has now sunk rather low in the scale of "must" reading for today's art historians: Bernard Berenson. That Berenson's valet had to perform the bizarre ritual of warming his wristwatch every morning lest his subtle sensing mechanisms be thrown out of balance speaks volumes about the vagaries of purely aesthetic art historical labor.

This is not to say that Warburg did not indulge in quirks of his own. In fact, he once labeled himself as a "pathophobe": someone pathologically prone to be afraid of illness. Yet there is a certain groundedness in Warburg's appreciation of the limits of the human condition that allows him to register a much fuller range of experience from his object of study. And lest one assume that Warburg excogitated this rich view of human nature unaided, it must be duly noted that Warburg was also deeply reliant on certain contemporary theoretical constructs. Friedrich Nietzsche's Apollonian-Dionysian dialectic became something of an intellectual leitmotif throughout Warburg's ruminations. But far more interesting, and more important to the core concerns of Warburg's mature work, was the theory of empathy (*Einfühlung*).

The doctrine of empathy, as developed in German aesthetic psychology in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, offered a sharp yet supple frame of reference for academics and practicing artists to understand the psychological mechanisms linking invention to crafting, as well as the crafted object to the spectator. Imagine a simple lever, with the work of art as the fulcrum; on the left side an artist projects his mental state onto the given medium, which on the right side is recreated in the mind of the spectator. To the extent that the artist transfers this noetic state from one side of the fulcrum to the other, the work is successful. First developed in 1873 by Robert Vischer, empathy theory was in many respects a

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logical extension of traditional Aristotelian psychology in which various states of the soul are made manifest by motion: of an eyebrow, a cheek muscle, or a limb. The variations on ancient psychology which passed through Renaissance art theory (as *moti*), and which fascinated Warburg as figures in movement, were no doubt what Warburg ultimately sought when trying to categorize the various emotional formulæ (*Pathosformeln*) shared by antique and Renaissance art—a system of examining human experience that was placed at the very center of Ernst Robert Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948), significantly dedicated to Warburg. Warburg was thus able to align historical and contemporary perspectives in a manner that has been rarely surpassed.

Empathy theory was initially an explicit and vital part of his scholarly enterprise: already in the second paragraph of his 1894 dissertation it is described as a "determinant of style." Later in the same work, he declared that "the most difficult problem in all art . . . is that of capturing images of life in action." As early as the mid-1880s, in the hands of gifted critics and art historians like Cornelius Gurlitt and Adolf Göller, it became the tacit psychological explanation for employing a proto-formalist method of analyzing style. By the 1890s, empathy was the premier vehicle for authorizing the use of abstract, elemental forms by contemporary artists and architects. Warburg transcended the literal use of this theory but it cast a spell on his contemporaries for years to come, culminating in Wilhelm Worringer's 1908 classic, *Abstraction and Empathy*.

Taking another page from Nietzsche, Warburg seems to have amplified his understanding of psychology by generally regarding the creative act as a struggle, with art being the stage upon which otherwise destructive psychic and social forces were contained. Therefore, when in the pursuit of his "activist" art historical project, Warburg set himself the task of reanimating the forces which required the Renaissance reuse of pagan mythological imagery, he came to inhabit a world where conflict, superstition, and fear were perilously close to the surface.

This constellation of issues coalesces in one of his finest pieces, the fugue-like "Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunctions to his Sons" (1907). In its contrapuntal density, Warburg suggests an identification with an impractical seventeenth-century descendant of a proud Florentine mercantile family who composed a ten-generation family history. He quotes extensively from the descendant's biography of his eponymous great-grandfather, and the clear layering of personalities seems to imbue his narrative with a focused, "empathic" warmth. Warburg's personal appreciation of the demands placed by commerce upon family relations allows him to extract from the tale a symbolic nugget implanted and commented upon by both Francescos: the operations of the goddess Fortuna. As Warburg noted, not only does Fortuna relate to "chance" and "wealth" but also to "storm winds," each of which bears upon the experience and expectations of international businessmen of any age. Deftly wielding this device as an interpretive instrument, Warburg clarified the psycho-generational conflict between the Sassettis, examining contemporary documentary evidence regarding the appearance of Ghirlandaio's portraits in the family chapel, illuminating the iconography of various family emblems and *imprese*, and reaching compelling conclusions about "the psychology of an educated layman" in early Renaissance Florence. Along the way, he tosses off innumerable insights about the vexatious cross-currents of style and iconography, the vortex of issues surrounding church patronage in the Renaissance, as well as the complex birthing pains of Renaissance pride and self-awareness from the more feudal habits of fidelity and honor. Because it is anchored in the concrete data of individual experience, and because Warburg was exceptionally careful about drawing conclusions from his evidence, this

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account—like every other in this collection—offers profound lessons about the limits of historical generalization, lessons that should no doubt confound those leftists who seek in Warburg tools with which to take iconology to new depths of political subservience.

The research on the Sassetti piece set in motion or summarized a number of related inquiries on the so-called *imprese amarose*, court festivals, and the adoption of pagan methods of prophesy by fifteenth-century German clerics and statesmen. Each involved capturing from the imagery and pertinent documentation the interplay of deep, psychic tensions. The centrifugal tug exerted by these and numerous other concerns took a heavy toll on an individual who was so given to projecting himself into his work. That Warburg was incapable of completing a series of other projects no doubt compounded the depth of his inner torment. Adding insult to injury, when Warburg's literary executors were charged with the challenge of forging from his work a coherent publishing program to become a banner for the institute, they had to drop the remaining five titles from a projected six-volume series of his collected writings so the library could be safely removed from Hamburg. The bulk of Warburg's writings had in fact been notes and fragmentary drafts for works in progress or glosses on previously published material. This, more than any other single factor, accounts for the project having languished until now. Following his death in 1929, the institute commissioned a biography which was eventually completed by Gombrich, by then the institute's director, and published in 1970 with the second edition released about fifteen years later. Amid generally warm reviews, Edgar Wind was outraged that Warburg had to endure such an unsympathetic treatment. Despite his misgivings concerning the value of a large-scale translation of Warburg's work, Gombrich's "Intellectual Biography," as it was subtitled, effectively launched the renewal of interest that culminated in the current wave of publications.

Titles trickled out for the rest of the 1970s and 1980s, and a massive Warburg symposium was held in Hamburg a decade ago, with a handsome volume of essays exploring many facets of Warburg's career as the result. Another volume of essays on Warburg's library appeared in 1993. And the secondary literature on Warburg swells every season with numerous articles and studies, both academic and journalistic, appearing in several languages. The handsome structure Warburg and his brothers commissioned in the mid-1920s to house the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* as it was then called—also the subject of its own monograph—has been renovated by the city of Hamburg and now functions under the name *Warburg-Haus* as a semi-independent seminar of the local university. It issues a series of publications directly modeled on the original institution's *Studies* and *Lectures*, and is a sponsor of the reprinted "Study Edition" released through the Akademie Verlag in Berlin.

The "Study Edition" will generally maintain the plan of the original series, with fourteen volumes distributed across seven sections, including the 1300-image Mnemosyne Atlas. Other projected volumes will present his shorter essays, the early writings on expression theory, letters, journals, and his autobiography, as well as the library's catalog and records. Warburg's *Bruchstücke* on expression theory as well as the autobiography should be very rewarding and are much anticipated because so little of these tantalizing materials found their way into Gombrich's study.

The contrast between the German product and its American version is striking: the former publisher displayed enormous respect for the original by simply adding a new preface—*hors texte*—and leaving everything else intact, including the fold-out plate in the 1912 lecture as well as the division into two volumes. Its heavy cream-colored stock is handsomely bound in thick, blue library boards. It is a pleasure to hold, open, and read. The American text is some-

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what oddly packaged: neon-blue boards with garish, vertically disposed foil lettering that is so remote from the publishing standards of the original (and current) institute that one has to wonder what the market research discovered. Is Warburg destined to become the new nerdish fad for Generation X?

Beyond visual considerations, the American product also suffers from a profound lack of vision on two levels. Appearing as it does in the Getty Center's celebrated and highly worthwhile series of "Texts and Documents," it attempts to be an exacting and faithful reproduction of the original book. But apparently due to financial considerations—hard to imagine in any Getty undertaking—it was bound as a single volume. The original and reprinted German volumes each carry an elaborate editorial apparatus, essentially massive appendices, that follow the essays. The Getty editors reproduced identically the structure of the two volumes as one, which gives the book a preposterously clumsy flow. There is no clear demarcation of where the two volumes are divided. The editors should have decided to publish either one volume with all the apparatus at the end and a comparative table, or concordance, of contents, or faithfully reproduce the two volumes.

By the same token, there is no mention of the five-page lacuna in the second volume of the German edition: an occasional piece excoriating the powers-that-be over Cassirer's difficulties securing a university position that was removed from the galleys at the last moment to avoid provoking the censors. Likewise, the original editors settled for removing any hint of his ancestry by referring to the author simply as "A. Warburg." The lack of attention to minor but telling details of this sort forces one to question the value of translating all of the apparatus as well, some of which are interesting afterthoughts by Warburg, but most of which are simply superannuated editorial "updates," bringing turn-of-the-century scholarship up to speed for the readers of the 1930s. It may have been better to repeat the formula for the Italian and French editions by offering translations of the major essays as they were originally published. Rest assured that the translation is uniformly superb, with random spot-checks coming up with well-wrought phrasings that could only have pleased so demanding a writer as Warburg.

The second problem area is the selection of Kurt Forster to write the introduction. For every other volume in the series, the Getty has diligently sought out leading scholars to furnish critical introductory essays and translated them if necessary; here, the now-former director of the Getty Center seems to have intervened for no other reason than vanity. Forster did publish an "interesting" if tangential essay on Warburg in the 1970s, as well as a few more recent contributions on less prominent aspects of Warburg's work. But what an opportunity this could have been for scholars like Michael Podro, one of Warburg's most sensitive readers, or Dieter Wuttke, who compiled a superb collection of writings by and about Warburg in the 1980s. The real losers, however, are those for whom this will be the first brush with Warburg. Forster's gaseous introduction begins by misrepresenting the impact of Warburg's work and then proceeds to careen from topic to topic without direction or focus. How palling in comparison to the informative publication history presented by the German team. In my estimation, it would have been far better to reprint the English translation of Bing's thoughtful tribute—one of the best pieces ever written about Warburg.

But that would have obscured the chance to cast Warburg as a prototypical leftist, something both editorial groups apparently desired. Unlike Wölfflin, who addressed worker's rallies and left extensive personal correspondence detailing his political views, Warburg was rather more circumspect about such matters. As the descendant of generations of bankers, as one who personally and explicitly identified with Florentine and Flemish families engaged in

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commercial enterprises centuries earlier, one must presume that Warburg was probably more of a classical liberal than anything else. Presumptions are not the order of the day, however, when one can offer more politically usable alternatives with virtually no effort. The German editors directly compare Warburg to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, making of Warburg a proto-semiotician by association. What Forster's essay attempts, though, is more insidious. By retroactively casting Warburg's *Kulturwissenschaft* as an ancestor of today's "Cultural Studies," one of the more odoriferous components of the current humanities landfill, one is invited to assume that subsequent political use of Warburg's method is in keeping with the master's intention. Forster's predictable invocation of Walter Benjamin to endow Warburg with a left-leaning conscience is another political gimmick. Gombrich's dismissal of Warburg's curiosity about nymphae as an innocent, if somewhat risqué, erotic distraction is here presented as a full-blown "erotic projection" that had "obstinately taken precedence over professional, art-historical concerns." While Forster does offer a trove of solid fact, enough is sufficiently distorted that one is led to question seriously the value of the whole. When a picture of a Hopi ceremonial altar is placed next to a photographic "still life" of the mechanical equipment of the Warburg library as an instructive and enlightening comparison, one rightly wonders if there is a bottom to be struck.

But there is nothing new in the effort to politicize Warburg. Back in the mid-1960s, the Panofsky protegé William Heckscher perpetrated an atrocious calumny by claiming, "Whether he knew it or not [!], Warburg sided with those who promoted Modern Art, Psychoanalysis, Relativity, Tradeunionism, and Technical Advance—each in its own way." Heckscher offered a prime instance of biting the mind that feeds you, and built his sweeping iconological analysis of the entire pre-World War One order on Warburg's penmanship! To Heckscher, by combining Roman and Gothic letters in the same word, Warburg was reflecting the tendency of an entire age toward synthesis. This is the kind of utter silliness into which Panofsky never fell, but which his method invites. It is, however, the kind of silliness that one sees on every broadcast of a network news program, or in the layout of the major news weeklies: because a picture is worth a thousand words, how fortuitous that one can enjoy the tacit backing of a sophisticated art historical method to force imagery into the service of an ideology. One can only hope that Warburg's autobiographica will offer reflections on Fortuna's meddlings with his academic progeny.

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Two poems
by Morri Creech

Engine work: variations

i

June morning. Sunlight flashes through the pines.
Blue jays razz and bicker, perch on a fence post
Back of my grandfather's yard. His stripped engines
Clutter the lawn. And everywhere the taste
Of scuppernongs, just moments off the vines,
So sour that you would swear the mind has traced
A pathway through the thicket, swear the past
Comes clear again, picked piecemeal from the dust—

ii

Or else it's late—September—and the shade
Thicker than I recall: those cardinals,
Finches or mockingbirds still haven't made
A sound all afternoon, though ripe fruit swells
On vine, or branch . . . or bramble. Thus the frayed
Edge of recollection slowly ravels
Away to nothing, until that place is gone
Where the heart would know its object and be known.

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iii

All right. Not to begin with those backlit pines,
Those scuppernongs, the jay perched on a branch
Of sweet gum—no, oak, I think. With what, then?
With my grandfather holding a torque wrench
Or ratchet? Some old engine's stammer and whine
Before it starts or doesn't—a house finch,
Singing or silent? Language, too, seems wrong,
Though it's all I have. *Grandfather. Scuppernong.*

iv

To fix him in some moment, word for word,
That man who taught me gears and cylinders, sweat,
Precision of machinery—the hard
Love of assembling things:
I know the heat
All summer hung like a scrim where pistons fired
And the boy I was watched in the raw sunlight;
Spilled oil rainbowed in its shallow pan.
One birdcall, maybe. Fruit on a trellised vine . . .

v

Impossible not to change things, move the words
From here to there. It's late now. Nothing's settled—
Not engine noise nor the sound of one far bird
The mind sings true. Which version of the world
Should I believe? This morning in the yard
Scuppernongs hang and sweeten. Pine boughs yield
Some fragment of the blue jay's call, a sound
The resonant air repeats but cannot mend.

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The music of farewell

Descending for the last time to the underworld,
the soul of Orpheus addresses his audience.

It's true, of course, that the dusk-umbered leaves
Deepening on the hawthorn are a mere sleight
Of sun and shadow, true the olive groves
And tamarisks beside the river sway
To an off-key breeze, not to their own delight—
And the blue teal, arrowing through the stray
October clouds, keep to their appointments
According to schedule but not with us in mind,
Though you would have it otherwise. What sense
Is there in listening to the sun-shot wind
Croon through the autumn branches, once the song
Behind the song is finished? Always you listened
With your heads tilted towards the absolute
As if the gods would sing to you, while the long
Phrase of my sorrow held your world together,
Your world of stripped fields and the ripening fruit
That weighs each thick bough earthward. Everywhere
You turned, the lavish music of farewell
Lent consequence to things, so that desire
Itself became fulfillment to your ear.
And though the mist that swept the cold laurel
Was neither Apollo stroking Daphne's hair
Nor Ceres weeping at the doors of hell,
Though nothing I sang could raise Eurydice
Up from the mute depths again, note by note,
It makes no difference now for me to say
The gods are silent, or that the world seems less
For what the hours and seasons claim from us.
More than the sounds that set the stones and trees
In place, and that arrange both shade and light,
A sad music ripens in the heart; caught
Between oblivion and paradise,
It enters the world as loss, though in such ways
That the cadences of grief resound as praise.

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London journal

The triumph of experience over hope

by John Gross

There is an old vaudeville routine, in which a comedian dons a succession of scary masks. As he puts each one on, he taps the shoulder of a man standing in front of him; when the man turns round, he is not in the least shocked, only irritated. Finally the comedian gives up, gets out a cigarette, and taps the man on the shoulder to ask him for a light. The man turns round, takes one look at the comedian's real face and cries out in terror.

I had a comparable experience in the run-up to *Apocalypse*, a new show at the Royal Academy. It was billed as shocking and controversial, but as I read accounts of its star exhibits and saw pictures of them, I felt strangely unmoved. An effigy of the present Pope lying on the ground, felled by a meteorite? Uh-huh. A giant dog kneaded out of balloons by Jeff Koons? Not him again! A reconstruction of a bus shelter outside Auschwitz? The kind of thing, given some other recent exhibitions, that you've almost come to expect. A film of a man beating up a woman and having sex with her? No big deal, even if it was made by someone who had also produced music videos for Madonna.

And then I saw a newspaper picture of Norman Rosenthal, who organized the show, and I momentarily lost my composure. It wasn't so much Rosenthal's smiling features as the fact that he had been photographed *in situ*, at the Academy itself—a reminder that he has been exhibitions secretary and a moving spirit there for some twenty years. And it wasn't so much the picture, as the inanities of the interview which it led on to. "The British people still get more upset about sex than about violence. That's wrong. It's violence that should upset middle England more." Or again, "what this exhibition will be about is experience. And experience, in turn, means healing."

Meanwhile another venerable institution, the Victoria and Albert Museum, seems determined to show that it, too, knows how to keep up with the times. It has announced plans to install four slot machines designed by Malcolm McLaren, the former manager of the famous punk rock group the Sex Pistols. Visitors will be able to play the machines, and the combination of symbols that comes up will determine which of the two-thousand pictures illustrating McLaren's career—or, as he himself puts it, "the curve of my life"—are projected on the walls.

The V&A will have to do better than that, however, if it is going to catch up with the Tate. One of the Tate's recent stunts was a display designed by an artist named Patrick Brill in which visitors were invited to write messages on cards and leave them in a box: each Sunday, Brill selected three or four of them and pinned them up on a noticeboard. The week in which the Queen Mother celebrated her hundredth birthday yielded a particularly fine crop. One card which had

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been chosen read, "Fuck the Queen Mother coz she got Princess Diana killed so she's gonna get sliced up"; another, somewhat more sedately, "I would rather look at photocopies of the Queen Mother's arse." Naturally there were complaints. When they were put to a member of the Tate staff, she replied that the comments had helped visitors to express themselves, and that "if it offends people, then at least it has reached them." More experience.

I need hardly say that things aren't like that all the time. The great museums (some more than others) still perform their proper functions as well. But in all but a few cases the cheap provocations and low-grade bids for popularity have become an essential part of their message. In this they are at one with the culture which surrounds them. People talk about the shock of the new, but Hamlet's "thousand shocks" is more like it. We are bombarded every day by calculated little outrages, too many of them to take in—or perhaps they aren't meant to be outrages, and are simply unusually colorful examples of what people have come to take for granted.

In the opening scene of a new West End comedy, played strictly for laughs, a paraplegic falls out of his wheelchair and urinates over the man who tries to pick him up. (The same author, to show that he has a heart, had another play running earlier this year—a manipulative piece about a child who is both autistic and dying of cancer.) In Oxford Street, one of London's main shoping thoroughfares, a building is shrouded with a tarpaulin covered with the letters "fcuk." It's the logo of a fashion firm, French Connection, which is already widely admired for its cleverness, but which can surely never before have been displayed on such a large scale. Up in Scotland, the University of Dundee, in an effort to attract suitable students, has sent out thousands of posters and postcards showing pictures of a bra, a condom, and a pint of beer. (According to the university's director of admissions, "our research focus group tells us it's what young people respond to.") At 10 Downing Street, Cherie Blair leaves the table in the middle of dinner—the guests include a leading newspaper editor and his proprietor; a moment later she returns with baby Leo and proceeds to breast-feed him.

It would be easy to go on, to compile a merry mosaic of scenes from life in Britain in 2000. But one further example must serve. Early in the summer, a small girl was found murdered in circumstances which attracted an exceptional amount of publicity. In the wake of the crime, the most widely read British Sunday paper, the *News of the World* (the "News of the Screws" to aficionados), launched a campaign to "name and shame" convicted pedophiles, publishing column after column of photographs along with addresses and other details. The police objected, and so did more responsible papers. But politicians are afraid of incurring the *News of the World*'s enmity, and no major figure from either main party spoke out against what was a pretty obvious incitement to public disorder.

In the event, many of the men of the list were assaulted or forced to go into hiding—and other men, too, since there were inevitably cases of mistaken identity. A large housing estate in the city of Portsmouth (virtually a town in itself) was reduced to near-riot conditions for a week. In Newport, in South Wales, a woman fled from her home to escape from a mob who were under the impression that she was a pedophile. It sounds like a bad joke, but she was in fact a pediatrician.

Such a campaign could equally well have taken place under the Conservatives, and there is no reason to suppose that the results would have been any different if it had. In a free country, the media, the arts, public opinion, and public taste go their own way most of the time. Nor have the Conservatives in opposition shown a notably sophisticated grasp of cultural issues. But perhaps we should be grateful to politicians when they leave culture alone, and what distinguishes Labour under Tony Blair is the extent to which it doesn't.

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The most conspicuous symbol of Britain remains the notorious Millennium Dome at Greenwich, which by the time it closes at the end of the year will have cost getting on for a billion pounds of public money. That the contents of the Dome should have proved a complete fiasco will come as no surprise to anyone who read the claptrap surrounding it in the months leading up to its opening last New Year's Eve. But even critics had a sinking feeling that it would somehow be made to work, at a practical level, thanks to government pressure and the supposed "black arts" of the minister in charge of it at the time, Peter Mandelson. What nobody foresaw was the amount of sheer ineptitude and financial irresponsibility which has gradually been revealed.

The saga has now turned into a full-blown horror story, amid rocketing losses, woeful attendance figures, recriminations, bluster, the disclosure of dubious secret deals, the collapse of an attempt to sell the site to a Japanese bank—once it became clear that vital information had been withheld—and the mumbled acknowledgments that the undertaking has not proved quite the success that had been hoped, including one from Tony Blair himself. (A few unkind commentators promptly pointed out that less than a year ago Blair had said that the Dome was going to be "the first paragraph in my next election manifesto.")

Any *Schadenfreude*, however, is tempered by the thought that the money, most of it provided by the National Lottery Fund, might have been better spent. But then the whole history of lottery grants is an interesting footnote to the Blair project or at any rate to life in a Blairish climate. An exceptionally large sum has been bestowed on that shrine of radical drama, the Royal Court Theatre, for instance—large enough to enable it to provide new leather seats that make you feel as though you are sinking into a Rolls Royce. But not a penny was forthcoming for the modest celebrations marking the recent sixtieth anniversary of the Battle of Britain (even though by the time the seventieth comes around it is unlikely that there will be many survivors left.)

This was hardly to be wondered at. Under the Blair regime a lack of sympathy for the military was nothing new: on one occasion, after Peter Mandelson had moved on from supervising the Dome to serving as Secretary for Northern Ireland, he tried to curry favor with a radio audience in the Irish Republic by describing the soldiers of the Household Division, whom he had been taken to see at the Trooping of the Colour ceremony when he was a child, as "a lot of chinless wonders." Thirty-nine members of the division have been killed during the Ulster troubles.

Meanwhile, despite a setback in its political fortunes, the cultural stance of the Blair government remains largely unchanged. A significant development, far more significant in the long run than the Dome, is the appointment of an openly committed Blair supporter as director general of the BBC. But that is a story for another day—or another journal.

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Theater

Playful, at times savage

by Mark Steyn

A few years ago, graciously deigning to appear on a British talk-show, Gore Vidal was irked to find himself interrupted in mid-flow by the host, Clive Anderson. "I'm not finished yet," he snapped.

"Well, who knows?," said Anderson. And he has a point. Vidal is never finished. Across the unbounded horizons of his masterful vision, a vast army of name-dropping anecdotes, droll aphorisms, doubtful statistics, and dubious propositions trots languidly in service of the wearily magisterial controversialist's idiosyncratic thesis of the twentieth century, one as remarkably indifferent to humdrum reality as the man himself. In an ideal world, he might have been another Cole Porter or Noel Coward, content to glitter brilliantly on the surface. Instead, he's the Noel Coward of conspiracy theorists, bitching queenily in the subterranean canyons of America's dark heart.

On this side of the ocean, with two-hundred television channels, most of us are glued happily to the wrestling network or the lesbian station, blissfully unaware that somewhere out there on channel 187 the old boy is still going through his well-loved routine. In Britain, with (until recently) only three or four channels, the chances of encountering Vidal are far higher. For one thing, he prides himself on being an expert on not just U.S. affairs, but also on those of the United Kingdom, France, Italy, you name it. Some years back, he appeared on the BBC and launched into one of his little riffs about how every major decision in Britain was made by something called "M-Fifteen." M-Fifteen was behind this, M-Fifteen was behind that, M-Fifteen was calling the shots on everything of any consequence.

His viewers were mostly baffled. "M-Fifteen" is the formulation one would normally use for a motorway—the local equivalent of an interstate. Instead of I-93 and such, the British have the M1 running to the north and the M4 running west. What, wondered his audience, had the M15, some blameless little strip of asphalt in the provinces, done to attract Vidal's ire? It gradually dawned on them that this "M-Fifteen" on which Gore was pronouncing, he was also mispronouncing. The sinister agency to which he was referring is, in fact, MI5—that's "I" as in "Intelligence," as in the British Secret Service. Vidal's authority suffered a catastrophic blow; even the most gullible schmuck isn't going to buy conspiracy theories from a guy who doesn't know how to pronounce the conspirators.

Since then, he's wisely stuck to his native sod. I caught him a while back giving a semi-improvised lecture on this great republic that many readers will no doubt know by heart: America is not a democracy. It is governed by the National Security Council. The National Security Council invented the Communist threat to justify the massive costs needed to keep America on a permanent war footing. To ensure that the non-existence of the Communist threat is

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never seriously questioned, they and their allies in the corporate boardrooms have created two identical political parties.

If you question any aspect of this analysis, Gore looks at you with amused pity as if even poor little you surely can't be that naïve, dahling. But the other objection is a more basic one: so, what's your point? Everything seems to be ticking along nicely in the national security state, doesn't it? Not to Vidal. "Very terrible things are about to happen," he warned. "There isn't any money left. . . . You're going to have a race war." Oh, woe, woe, and thrice woe! This was in 1991, and we're still waiting for the race war and for the money to run out. As for the very terrible things about to happen, well, we have had the Clinton Administration. But, during the president's recent difficulties, Vidal was a defender of Mr. Clinton and a friend of the first lady, albeit an unusually straightforward one: "Boys are meant to squirt as often as possible with as many different partners as possible. Girls are designed to take nine months to lay an egg," he said. "Clinton doesn't much care for Warm Mature Relationships with Warm Caring Women. Hence an addiction to the impersonal blowjob." The British journalist Geoffrey Wheatcroft observed that he would very much like to see Vidal's pal Mrs. Clinton on stage sitting next to him and "nodding gravely while he says that."

Vidal comes from a political family—grandson of a senator, half-brother to Jackie Kennedy, and some sort of distant kinsman to Al Gore, perhaps one of those dirtpoor, hardscrabble Tennessee farm cousins the vice-president claims to have spent so much of his childhood with. He would like to have been president himself, but the National Security State squashed that one early on. So instead he writes about politics, and, just in time for the election, a revival of *The Best Man* has arrived on Broadway (at the Virginia). Correction: that should be *Gore Vidal's The Best Man*, the proprietorial title chosen officially to avoid confusion with an unrelated 1999 film called *The Best Man* (which most of us, if we'd ever heard of it, had already forgotten) but unofficially, one likes to think, because it neatly encapsulates the author's self-evaluation. And, to be honest, it's hard to disagree. As a casual acquaintance with them makes plain, his opinions are mostly preposterous. But his play is a salutary lesson, if not for politicians then certainly for playwrights.

The Best Man opened during the 1960 election season, and Vidal has refused to tinker with it, a very wise decision. He is, with his usual flair, flaunting its datedness as a rebuke to the moronic present. But, stylistically, his anticipation of the bland telepap politics of our time is so prescient as to make the play feel oddly contemporary. Forty years ago, a nominating convention was still just that: not a coronation of the primaries' victor, but a convention with an outcome at stake, with deals to be made. In Vidal's unnamed party, which it is assumed will win the election, the power brokers meeting in Philadelphia have to decide between a remote, cerebral, patrician secretary of state and an ambitious, rough-hewn, blustering senator. The former is a serial adulterer, the latter has a homosexual episode buried deep in his past. The austere Secretary of State William Russell tells Senator Joe Cantwell that he's prepared to use the homosexual story if Cantwell goes ahead and releases Russell's stolen psychiatric records, showing he's had a nervous breakdown. "I won't throw my mud if you won't throw yours," he says. But the senator has a better understanding of how to square the unpleasantnesses of the past and a shrewder insight into the virtues of "personality" over the "issues."

Plot-wise, there's nothing especially new here, though Vidal, liberally extrapolating from Adlai Stevenson, Richard Nixon, and Harry Truman, has managed to anticipate the great questions of our own times: does "character" count or, as the sophists would have it, is moral integrity incompatible with the pursuit of power? The strength of *The Best Man*, though, lies not in its themes so much as the way the author nags away at

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them. What makes the play is Vidal's refusal to condescend to his characters, a virtue sadly rare in American drama, particularly of a political bent. If he permits himself a modest restoration comedy jest in naming his senator "Cantwell," for the most part he seems closer to the elegant even-handedness of continental boulevard fare. Whether or not he despises his dramatis personae, he knows they don't despise themselves, and he respects his characters enough to let each speak in his or her own plausible, coherent voice. This extends not just to the principals, but to the ailing President Hockstadter, who loathes both men but knows he'll have to endorse one of them. The womenfolk are also well-drawn: the insanely devoted senator's wife projects both a sad desperation but also a cunning, incisive viciousness; Mrs. Russell, by contrast, will stand by her philandering man, but only if he makes it to the presidency. This play sparkles, because both sides—and the various permutations thereof—know how to return the ball. It's always the rallies that make a match enjoyable.

To be sure, as Jack Kennedy is supposed to have told Vidal after seeing the show, "In a real campaign, we don't have all that time to talk about the meaning of it all." And even Kennedy needed speech writers to crank out the epigrams this play's characters spout effortlessly. Yet, though Vidal always touts himself as a great champion of artifice, you're most conscious here of reality—of characters marshalling their arguments as though they believe in them. That's such a basic law of stagecraft that it seems pathetic to have to point it out. But that's the odd thing about this revival: it makes you weep not for the state of contemporary politics but for the state of contemporary playwriting. Four decades after *The Best Man*, consider by way of comparison Hollywood's first draft of the impeachment trial, the new movie *The Contender*. In this plot, the vice-president has died and the president, a Democrat, nominates a lady senator from Ohio to succeed. Her confirmation hearings turn into a nightmare when some photographs of the senator at college taking part in an orgy find their way into the hands of the Republican chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. Instead of the equal-opportunity cynicism of Vidal, *The Contender* is boilerplate limousine liberalism. The Republican is a "second-rate McCarthy," a slavering puritan hypocritical beast who salivates so noisily even the congressional microphones pick it up. But, of course, the urge to patronize your characters extends not just to the baddies but the goodies, too. The lovable lady senator is in favor of affirmative action, campaign-finance reform, abortion on demand, state atheism, the remodelling of the U.S. armed forces as a tool to prevent "genocide" anywhere on earth, the confiscation of all firearms, and the abolition of capital punishment. All no doubt admirable policies, but as a platform for a senate campaign in Ohio not perhaps the most obvious winning strategy.

Vidal would probably deplore such an impertinent comparison. In his forays into film, he's always had a sound grasp of the medium, happy to do the screenplay for Bob "Penthouse" Guccione's version of *Caligula* (1978), in which respected actors such as Peter O'Toole and John Gielgud lounged around in togas sandwiched between obscure actresses to whom apparently the toga budget didn't stretch, an agreeably laughable drama in period costume—or, anyway, periodically in costume. There's never been any pretence from Gore Vidal that the movies are any place to advance any serious arguments, and, if only for that reason, give me *Myra Breckenridge* over *The Contender*. But these days the feeble reflexive prejudices of Hollywood at its didactic worst are routinely echoed on the stage, albeit with a smaller budget. Say what you will for Vidal, he may be merely trifling with ideas, but he enjoys letting them skitter across the proscenium like bumper cars at a funfair. If it is indeed part of God's purpose that deranged lefties should have a hammerlock on the arts, better Gore Vidal than Alec Baldwin.

So the big question at the Virginia is:

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how, given such dandy material, did they make such a pig's ear of it? Certain plays —from *Oedipus Rex* to *South Pacific*—are all but production proof: no matter how insane the directorial concept or how misguided the acting, the play will come through. *The Best Man* isn't quite in that category, but it is fair to say that, if the production had one-fifteenth of the script's zing, you'd be home and dry. Why it doesn't is one of the first great mysteries of the new season.

"Irony is un-American," says a character, ironically, in Vidal's new novel. But this revival seems determined to take him at his word. Not one of Ethan MacSweeney's three male principals seems to have a grip on his role. Charles Durning, first billed as President Hockstadter, is one of the glories of the American stage, but, on the night I caught him, wasn't on top of his lines and his character tottered woozily about the stage permanently out of focus. As William Russell, the monologuist Spalding Gray fires his lines as if he's shooting for gold in Olympic darts-throwing, but without ever suggesting there's a human being behind them. For some reason, he recoils from character, too busy distancing himself from Russell to allow Russell to distance himself from us. Chris Noth, a fine stage actor before he found TV fame in *Sex and the City*, reduces Senator Cantwell to a sour blustering bully full of idiotic stage mannerisms that look as if he's still rehearsing them with the assistant choreographer. Michael Learned (Mrs. Russell) is overwrought, Christine Ebersole (Mrs. Cantwell) is shrill, Elizabeth Ashley (a party women's club leader) chews the scenery. Put these variously mismatched styles on John Arnone's confusing set of invisibly walled twin hotel suites, and it's no wonder Vidal's script never really finds its rhythm. It needs a size and swagger, the confidence to be as melodramatically stylized as Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis in *The Sweet Smell of Success*. Instead it's shrunken and tentative. Satire is what closes Saturday night, George Kaufman famously said, and he had a pile of yellowing scripts to prove it. With Truman and Stevenson long forgotten as vivid human presences, Vidal can be justly proud that his script has survived half-a-lifetime of Saturday nights. But he should be very much ashamed of this feeble, third-rate production. You begin to appreciate the revised title: with this cast and this director, *Gore Vidal's The Best Man*, no question.

At the time of writing, I don't know the result of the presidential election (Bush with around 378 of the 538 electoral votes, but that's just an educated guess), but it is interesting that a forty-year old Gore Vidal play should be the theater's only comment on the subject. It's likely that Vidal's fascination with politics and history has been no aid to a career in the theater, which is increasingly indifferent to either. As a consequence, he's one of our lost playwrights: a man with a canny sense of dramatic construction who abandoned the form in favor of the novel.

Noel Coward, a generation older, is the quintessential man of the theater. Indeed, if one had to conjure the theatrical world in one person, it would be Coward on a balcony, in a smoking jacket, with a cigarette holder, and a tinkling piano in the next apartment. Unlike Vidal, he was a self-made elitist, and politically inclined to deference —an old-fashioned patriot, friend of the royal family, nothing wrong with dear old Blighty except its marginal tax rates. When he writes about history or war or social trends, he can be cringe-makingly mawkish. But, in his best plays, his characters are for the ages. *Blithe Spirit* (1941) is the one about the chap who finds himself inconveniently haunted by his late wife: it's no *Private Lives*, but it remains one of Coward's most popular works. Seeing the Pearl Theatre Company's off-Broadway revival in the wake of *The Best Man*, you can't help noticing what Coward and Vidal have in common: both are witty—though Vidal is rather more pleased with himself; both are playful and at times savage, but also sweet and fairminded. Coward is more interested

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in characters in action, Vidal in a premise for which it is necessary to have characters to advance. But with both authors tone is crucial, and Stephen Hollis's *Blithe Spirit* is both blithe and spirited in a way *The Best Man* never is. Doug Stander, as the put-upon husband, and Joanne Camp and Hope Chernov as his wives, both living and deceased, wring all the laughs out of the play yet also emphasize the forlorn, lonely quality at its heart: the very Cowardian equation of marriage and death.

If *Blithe Spirit* is a sadder play than it first appears, one wouldn't want to get carried away and hail Coward for plumbing the depths. As a writer, he was content to explore the profundities of the surface—the manners and mores, codes, and conventions by which we live. The fellows who fish in the shallows often, it seems to me, hook the big ones—Coward; P. G. Wodehouse—about whom Roger Kimball wrote last month; and the children's author Richmal Crompton, one of whose "Just William" stories contains the only analysis of Communism you'll ever need (William's older brother decides to become a Bolshevik and goes around noisily demanding that everyone should have the same rights and be treated equally—until William says he too wants to join the party).

What's demoralizing is those authors who think they're diving into the deep and don't realize their bottom and legs are sticking up out of the water flailing wildly. At the Signature Theatre, *A Lesson Before Dying* is Romulus Linney's adaptation of an Earnest J. Gaines novel of the old South. It is 1948, in the backwoods of Louisiana, and a young black has been sentenced to death for a crime he didn't commit. No one in town is bothered about the injustice, and the blacks in the neighborhood are mostly concerned that the condemned man should accept his fate and die with dignity. There is much weepin' and a-wailin', and many scenes circle repetitively back on each other as the playwright comes up with new ways to say what he said ten minutes earlier. There is no genuine sense of the segregationist South except in the most crudely drawn clichés and most of the cast—black and white—seem ground down by the solemnity of their dialogue. It is a wretched, exploitative evening that demeans its subject.

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Art

Rembrandt & Venice

by Karen Wilkin

It's a truism these days that there is no single way of thinking about the history of art, no single way of telling the story of what happened or of interpreting the visual evidence that has come down to us. The only constant is the fact that no work of art, no movement, no artist can be considered in isolation. Instead of a progression of clearly defined events or a coherent sequence of self-sufficient, more- or less-inspired individuals, the history of art is seen as a messy assortment of overlapping, sometimes confusingly interconnected phenomena. The closer we look, the more boundaries, both metaphorical and geographical, blur, even when we take into account the force of individual personalities or the powerful, unavoidable, defining characteristics of national style. It's a tale not of logical cause and effect, but of unexpected cross-fertilizations and chance encounters, of chains of influence and reaction, of improvisation and innovation. Unshakable certainties would be far easier to deal with, but the reward for giving up orderly categories is a subtler, more thought-provoking, and perhaps truer idea of the complicated relationship of artists and works of art over time. It certainly has made for some extremely interesting exhibitions and provocative catalogs.

The Metropolitan Museum's celebration of its collection of Netherlandish painting two years ago was informed by the assumption of two-way exchanges between Italian and Northern European art, an idea more fully explored in last Fall's huge, fascinating extravaganza at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, which documented the rich and unpredictable responses of the Venetian Renaissance painters to the work of their colleagues in the Netherlands and Germany—and vice versa. The Palazzo Grassi show revealed surprising connections between quattrocento Flemish and Venetian portraits. It tracked the way Albrecht Dürer strove to assimilate what he admired in the work of his Italian counterparts and the ways that the Italians appropriated what they admired in his work. It charted the effect on the painters of La Serenissima of a couple of Hieronymus Bosch landscapes, with their populations of fantastic figures, when they were brought to Venice—where they still remain. And more. "Vice versa," at the Palazzo Grassi, meant largely the way Titian's work quickly became a touchstone and a model for painters from all over Northern Europe, not only for his students and assistants in Venice—who included at various times aspiring painters from as far away as the Netherlands—but also for the German artists of the Habsburg court in Augsburg (which Titian himself visited).

"Vice versa" also signals the start of a long-lasting trend. I'm oversimplifying, of course, but during the Renaissance, the relationship of Northern and Italian artists could be described as a noisy, polyglot conversation with a great many participants, a

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tangled interchange stimulated by direct encounters with works of art, by travel, and by the widespread dissemination of prints. Yet before the sixteenth century ended and increasingly as the seventeenth advanced, this complex exchange became a kind of monologue broadcast from the south to the north. Italian art, both ancient and relatively "modern"—from the High Renaissance to the Caracci and Caravaggio—was something any ambitious northern artist had to come to terms with. Peter Paul Rubens spent an extended period in Italy—working for powerful patrons who admired his virtuosity—refining his craft and amassing aesthetic capital that would guarantee his success when he returned to Flanders. His phenomenal native abilities were both conspicuously enhanced and made infinitely more marketable by his first-hand knowledge of the latest thing from Italy. About a generation later, Rubens's star assistant, Anthony Van Dyck, followed in his mentor's footsteps, settling for a while in Northern Italy to paint the aristocracy in the hope of carving out an equally stellar international career. Further south, Nicolas Poussin was happily ensconced in Rome, studying Renaissance paintings, ancient Roman sculpture, and the landscape of the Campagna with equal enthusiasm.

In addition to such individual initiatives, the gradual establishment of national academies in Rome brought still other northerners to kneel before the splendors of Italian art: officially anointed young artists who competed furiously to win the chance to study directly the marvels of antiquity and the Renaissance masters. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and well into the nineteenth, artists from all over Europe flocked to Italy, mostly to Rome, some for relatively short, educational visits, others remaining more or less permanently and, like "Vanvitelli" or "Lo Spagnoletto," entering art history under Italianized versions of their names or Italian nicknames.

Even the great Dutch realist Rembrandt van Rijn, for all his supposed devotion to observing "life as it was," unembellished and unfiltered, constantly looked to his Italian predecessors, perhaps most notably to Titian, for direction, measuring himself against them for most of his life as a painter, rather in the way that Matisse both learned from and measured himself against Cézanne. Yet unlike his illustrious near-contemporaries, Rembrandt never went to Italy. That he didn't was a source of regret to his early champion, the humanist poet-statesman, Constantijn Huyghens, a perceptive talent-spotter who wrote enthusiastically about the painter's abilities between 1629 and 1631, when Rembrandt was in his early twenties—the earliest critical comments on the artist. Huyghens felt that studying the work of the Italian masters would be invaluable to the development of this gifted young painter and he fretted about Rembrandt's refusal to travel.

Huyghens needn't have worried. In 1631, at the age of twenty-five, Rembrandt left Leiden (where Huyghens had found him) and moved, if not to Italy, at least to thriving, cosmopolitan Amsterdam. Italian paintings flowed in substantial numbers into this flourishing commercial center at the early part of the seventeenth century, and over the next decade or so the young painter took full advantage of opportunities to see important pictures. For example, a vigorous little sketch of Raphael's portrait of Baldassare Castiglione (c. 1514–15, now in the Louvre) is vivid proof that Rembrandt studied the painting closely when its Dutch owner sold it in 1639. (It is vivid proof, too, of the way the eager young Dutchman transformed Raphael's smooth geometry and suave harmony, both quintessentially Italian, into something more earthy, a little less symmetrical and, well, more northern.)

The buyer of the Raphael, Alfonso Lopez, was a prosperous merchant, a converted Portuguese Jew resident in Amsterdam from 1638–41. What is especially interesting is that Lopez also owned two splendid Titians: that paradigm of opulent femininity, the lush, frontal *Flora* (c. 1520, now in

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the Uffizi), whose finely pleated shirt slips from her shoulder, and Flora's male opposite (c. 1512, now in the National Gallery, London), the non-allegorical portrait of an elegant bearded man, once thought to be the poet Ariosto, who stares down the viewer over his luxurious, brocade-clad shoulder. Rembrandt's little sketch of the Raphael may be the most direct evidence of his connection to Lopez's collection, but it's possible to find reverberations of all three of these wonderful Italian pictures within the painter's work for the rest of his life. Echoes of their poses, their costumes, their ample masses, and their subtle, form-enhancing light inform not only Rembrandt's portraits, but also his self-portraits, his religious paintings, and his "history" pictures.

Important as these encounters were to the painter, they were not his only confrontations with Italian art. Early on, Rembrandt absorbed diluted Italianate values—a kind of watered-down version of the Caravaggesque drama so fashionable in the early seventeenth century—from his teacher, Pieter Lastman. Then, during the years when he was the most successful portrait painter in Amsterdam, Rembrandt collected Italian pictures—along with an incredible miscellany of other things—assembling a carefully chosen group described, in the inventory of his possessions made during his later bankruptcy, as being by Raphael, Giorgione, Palma Vecchio, and Jacopo Bassano, and after Annibale Carracci. Rembrandt treasured, too, portfolios of prints after the Renaissance masters, including what the inventory calls "a very large album with almost all the work of Titian."

Anyone wishing to eavesdrop on Rembrandt's conversation with his Venetian forebears can do so this Fall at the small, tightly focused, and impressive exhibition "Rembrandt and the Venetian Influence"[1] at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries. This wholly unpredictable institution, now more than twenty-five-years old, regularly—and successfully—behaves like an ambitious little museum rather than a commercial gallery, putting together scholarly exhibitions of works by old and modern masters drawn from important public and private collections all over the U.S. and abroad. Their motivation, they say, is to do the shows that the museums aren't doing. While the relationship of Rembrandt and the Venetians has been thoroughly discussed in the literature, this Fall's exhibition of oil paintings is apparently the first such to concentrate on this aspect of his development. The centerpiece is Rembrandt's ravishing *Flora* (c. 1654), from the Metropolitan, a late homage to Titian's version of the theme—one of the pictures owned by Alfonso Lopez of Amsterdam. Rembrandt's Flora shares with her Italian ancestress a golden, blonde tonality, an outstretched right hand, offering a blossom, and the insistently crumpled folds of her fine linen shirt. Yet unlike Titian's frankly sensual, intimate image, Rembrandt's version offers no sense of his having captured his model *en déshabillé*; his Flora is neither pagan goddess nor Venetian courtesan, but rather a charming young Dutch woman rather fancifully gotten up for the occasion in a slightly extravagant but rustic hat.

It would have been spectacular to see the two delectable Floras side by side, but, alas, the Uffizi's Titian isn't at Salander-O'Reilly. Still, the point is made by the other pictures in the show. The wonderful amplitude of all of the Rembrandts, their generosity of form, their warm light, and their material (as opposed to thematic) sensuality speaks eloquently of the painter's debt to Titian and his circle. Despite the uncompromisingly northern traits of their subjects, the Venetian prototypes are palpable in a pair of late canvases, a lively portrait of a full-lipped, curly-haired *Young Man in a Black Beret* (1666, Nelson-Atkins, Kansas City),

1 "Rembrandt and the Venetian Influence" opened on October 3, 2000 at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York. The exhibition remains on view until November 18. A catalog, with essays by Sir Kenneth Clark, Frederick Ilchman, and David Rosand has been published by the gallery (71 pages, $60).

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and a profile of a lean, ascetic *Apostle James Major* (1661, private collection), clasping wrinkled hands in prayer. Here, direct comparisons are possible, thanks to the presence of a pair of energetic Tintoretto heads from the 1540s, a male portrait and self-portrait, and two fine half-length male portraits by Titian, the introspective, youngish "Friend of Titian" (c. 1550, De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco) and the bellicose, aging Francesco Duodo (French & Company, New York)—a recently rediscovered late work. A group of half-length Christs by Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese, ranging from the compelling to the predictable, enriches the context for the portraits. A marvelously dense Tintoretto *Raising of Lazarus* (1573, private collection), all bravura foreshortenings and theatrical gestures, and a slightly problematic *Lamentation* (c. 1650, Ringling Museum, Sarasota), ascribed to Rembrandt's studio, widen the show's investigations to include more complex figure compositions.

The result, apart from the considerable pleasure afforded by individual pictures, is to raise challenging questions about "northern-ness" and about influence itself. Rembrandt's admiration for the Venetians seems evident in the way he positioned figures in space and in the way he pulled forms up out of darkness with pools of light, as well as in the density of his massing, the fullness of his forms, the looseness of his modelling and drawing, and—possibly—the breadth of his paint-handling. (Many of these elements, though, also seem related to the Caravaggism that had seduced a generation of European painters slightly older than Rembrandt—which is grounds for another exhibition.) What is striking, however, is how different Rembrandt's works seem from their Italian prototypes. His figures appear to be more rough-hewn and thick-set; they move less easily. They seem unidealized, as though Rembrandt made no effort to generalize or minimize imperfections, but rather was as absorbed by aging flesh or lumpish features as by voluptuous ripeness.

The Italian paintings at Salander-O'Reilly always assume an underlying ideal, the *bella figura* that still conditions much of Italian life on many levels. Duodo, heaven knows, was no beauty, but Titian made him so vigorous, fierce, and commanding, with his gleaming armor, red cloak, and wind-blown beard, that it takes a while to realize just what a craggy, beaky old bird he must have been. There is no doubt about the slightly porcine, rather chinless look of the young man in the Nelson-Atkins Rembrandt, no minimizing his flagrant self-satisfaction; it all makes for a terrific picture, too, but there is no sense of flattery or "improvement."

Most engaging, in some ways, are the questions raised by the proximity of the Studio of Rembrandt *Lamentation* and the Tintoretto *Raising of Lazarus*. It is possible to see the curious angling of Christ's body in the Rembrandt as an echo of the histrionic poses typical of Tintoretto's generation of Venetians, even though the lamenting figures who emerge from the darkness at the foot of the cross into the light of the pallid body and pale shroud are blocky, still, and fairly frontal. But the longer you spend with the picture, the more the slender, tipped-up body, with its wrenched arm and sharply compressed head, reminds you not of Italian versions of the theme, but of Netherlandish precedents—the harsh, collapsed Christs in Rogier van der Weyden's wrenching *Depositions*, for example. All of which is a roundabout way of saying that while pairing Rembrandt's paintings with Venetian works brings to life his understanding of some of the best Italian painting of his day, at the same time it clarifies the things that separate this essentially northern painter from his southern counterparts: his forthright interest in appearances—including the appearance of people dressed up in studio costumes to look like figures in older art—his innate sense of restraint and sobriety, and his profound inwardness.

Yet these are also largely the qualities that separate Rembrandt from his fellow lowlander, Rubens. This international superstar of the Baroque seems, at first sight, to have

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been temperamentally closer to the Italian artists from whom he learned so much than Rembrandt was, perhaps because of the inherent differences between a citizen of Catholic Belgium and one of the largely Protestant but tolerant Dutch Republic. Rubens dazzles where Rembrandt probes. He improvises brilliantly on mythological themes; celebrates the pleasures of the flesh, the allure and danger of exotic animals, the glamor of zaftig, pearly-fleshed women and robust heroes; he wrings the last drop of pathos out of religious dramas. Rembrandt, no less sophisticated, no less knowledgeable about Italian art, and ultimately more inventive in terms of pure painting, always seems fundamentally more contemplative and less flamboyant.

"Rembrandt and the Venetian Influence" is absorbing, rewarding, and enlightening, as is the handsome catalog that accompanies the show, a beautifully produced, slim volume with essays by Sir Kenneth Clark—a reprint of his wide-ranging lecture "Rembrandt and the Venetians"—Frederick Ilchman, and David Rosand. Ilchman's piece is a persuasive identification of the portrait of Duodo. Rosand's is a model of illuminating information and intelligent summation of vast amounts of material, including updates of some minor points in Clark's essay. Rosand is particularly good when discussing the physical aspects of both Titian and Rembrandt—Titian's brushwork is one of his specialties. Unlike many contemporary art historians, he is keenly aware of the material properties of paintings, of their existence as *made* layers of sensuous stuff, and his reflections on the similarities of paint-handling in late Titian and late Rembrandt, both in relation to their experience of the properties of oil paint and their expressive aims, are wonderful reading. Of course, this is the ultimate theme of the exhibition and one of the great enigmas of art history: how two giants, separated by time, geography, and culture both, at the end of their lives, made paintings remarkably similar in mood and temperature, and arrived at remarkably similar ways of using their materials, forcing (or perhaps permitting) the brute stuff from which they built up their images to become eloquent in ways that seem almost independent of its role in evoking the surfaces and shapes of the perceivable world. The result, in the work of both artists, is not only to affirm the importance of the act of painting itself, but also to conjure up for the viewer a sense of heightened emotion, by suggesting that the painter himself was in some kind of exalted state when he moved paint around with such evident feeling, energy, and abandon. Rosand's observations at the end of his essay could stand as the lesson of the whole exhibition:

> From his earlier direct emulation of Titian, then, the aging Rembrandt grew closer to his Venetian model, not through continuing study of examples of Titian's art of painting but by reinventing that art for himself. Rembrandt rehearsed the discoveries that Titian made in the very nature of the oil medium. That the two eventually arrived at such similar results in the exploration of their art, which remained such a mystery to their immediate followers and more distant successors, confirms just how deeply founded was their relationship.

Exhibition notes

"Gerhard Richter: Abstract Paintings,"
at Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York.
September 16–October 21, 2000

Two complementary styles dominate Gerhard Richter's oeuvre: a distinctive, process-oriented type of abstraction and a cold, if ingenious, version of superrealism. As its title indicated, "Gerhard Richter: Abstract Paintings" offered a capsule history of the artist's efforts in abstraction, leaving his realist paintings, as it were, out of the picture. *Ohne Titel* (1965), the oldest work on view, looked nothing like the later, striated, layered, and color-filled abstractions we as-

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sociate with Richter. In it, three strips of gray-and-white-painted canvas, arranged in a simple construction resembling two columns and a transom, are affixed to the center of a small, white-primed canvas. Clearly indebted to minimalism, the work stands apart like an adopted child from the family of paintings, completed in the 1980s and 1990s, which form the show's core.

The abstract works from the last twenty years are so rooted in process that, I would argue, they must be seen in groups. Richter doesn't seem to aim for solitary masterpieces. Instead, he has staked out a characteristic mode, with each canvas presenting a number of technical variations on his basic style. The generic, numbered titles themselves emphasize the serial nature of the project. All the paintings start with multiple strata of glistening paint, which are either applied by laying pigment on a glass plate and then pressing it onto the canvas (and pulling away parts of layers when removing the glass) or by pulling selected layers away with tape. Chaotic, blurred, and shot-through both with jangling and complementary colors, the resulting works have an idiosyncratic and cumulative beauty. Because the pigments look as though they've been smeared on with a squeegee, the artist's hand is rarely evident. Chance determines much of the imagery. When Richter does opt for a direct gesture, it often has a comic implication. For instance in *Abstraktes Bild (707–2)* (1989), the artist drew a childlike line across and then circling through the built-up and rippled paint sediments that evokes finger-painting.

Richter began his series of abstractions in the 1970s, though the sole canvas from that period, *Abstraktes Bild (398–1)*, from 1976, still wallows in an ugly conglomeration of thin, smudged grays, greens, maroons, and reds. It lacks the vibrant colors and tensile energy of such later works as *Abstraktes Bild (708–4)*, from 1989. Here the glass has pulled fiery orange, yellow, and red horizontally across the upright, rectangular canvas, causing the paint to ripple both down and across the plane. Throughout the work, light green primer shows through in speckles, where the top layers of paint have been pulled away. In almost of all of these paintings, the frenzy of streaked and stippled color blurs across a variety of horizontal and vertical lines—some imprinted by tape, some with a brush—establishing a palimpsest of buzzing, gridlike energy held close to the pictures' surface. Only *Grun-Blau-Rot (789–70)* (1993), evokes a sense of calm: red shades into blue on a green ground in this small, rectangular canvas, one color blending into another as if through fog.

To my eye, the one very large work in the show, *6.MAI.1986*, in oil and pencil on paper mounted on canvas, achieves neither the meditative repose of *Grun-Blau-Rot (789–70)*, nor the tight effervescence of the typical, medium-sized abstractions. On its left side, the paint marks are dense and haphazard; elsewhere large stretches of white paper with scattered pencil lines are left without color. Adjacent to *6.MAI.1986* hangs another, resolutely impenetrable work consisting of six gelatin silver prints. All six of these black-and-white photographs are dark and out-of-focus images of people involved in some vaguely ritualistic activity. I can only suppose that these fuzzy photographs were included to complement the blurred colors used to great effect in the abstract paintings.

Although this show excludes his realist paintings, it does make an implicit case for the relevance of photography to both of Richter's parallel aesthetic avenues. A car drives down a country road in front of a chain-link fence, trees, and a house in the black-and-white photograph *14.OKT.'98*. Along its top edge, waves of brown, beige, and blue paint stand in for the sky, alluding to those landscape paintings of Richter's copied from two separate photographs of sea and sky. In *Ohne Titel (4.3.89)*, black oil paint obscures the bottom-half of a photograph of snow-covered mountains. The conjunction of paint and photographic image abstracts the jagged mountain range,

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so that it seems like an element of one of the nearby abstract paintings. For Richter, abstraction, realism, even photography are technical choices, means to an end, and they blur into each other seamlessly.

—*Daniel Kunitz*

"Louise Fishman: New Paintings,"
at Cheim & Read Gallery, New York.
September 15–October 21, 2000

Louise Fishman aptly describes herself as a "third generation Abstract Expressionist." Her new work certainly evinces a thorough assimilation of those aesthetic forebears: the paintings are dynamic, all-over compositions in oil on linen, punctuated by gestural marks and enlivened by an acute sense of color. Both in the catalogue essay, by John Yau, and in the reviews of her work, much is made of Fishman's roughness, but the artist invariably arrives at a wrought, entirely cohesive final product. The roughness comes from the visible remains of the effort she puts into each canvas, the scraped or sanded proof that these works are rethought time and again until Fishman settles on the ultimate composition.

In parts of *A Stranger* (2000), one can discern underpainting beneath the largely pink ground, and these scorings and bits of color add variety to what would otherwise be a static backdrop. They also harmonize effectively with the painting's furious, wide, gray brush strokes, laid over the pink ground, which faintly recall Franz Kline's own large, dry marks. Fishman wisely holds back from cluttering the pictorial space of *A Stranger*; she allows for the full interplay of the pink ground and the various tones and textures of her gray marks. By contrast, *That Iron String* (2000), in which thick, black, blue, and white marks range across the partially obscured yellow-green ground, succeeds because of its busy, higgledy-piggledy composition. Swooping lines drawn into the paint with a stick or brush-end lead the eye over a swarm of details: areas of heavy impasto, gulleys where paint has been scraped away and the collisions of color along the work's edges. Only in *Each and All* (2000) does the jumble of events seem to overwhelm the composition. Here no single color or tone dominates. Swatches of red, blue, green, white, gray, and pink compete, frequently mixing into murky browns. Almost none of the brush strokes are distinct, while watery splotches of pigment run as light pink drips down the canvas. Similarly bustling canvases, such as *The Sunrise Ruby* (1999) and *Flying Solo* (2000), succeed by maintaining some tonal harmony and by using dramatically discrete brush marks to anchor the composition.

Among the most pleasing of Fishman's works are those painted using vertically oriented rectangular supports. It is difficult to say just why, as Michael Fried has noted, vertical supports enhance abstract paintings, but it must have something to do with the reaching, almost spiritually uplifting character of the shape itself. Not surprisingly, Fishman tends to favor horizontal marks on square or horizontally oriented rectangular canvases and vertical marks on vertical canvases. The rich and somber blue tones of *Odd Mercy* (2000), through which heavier blue marks spill downwards, chasing lighter drips, put one in mind of Asian screen painting. And, while *Kiss Off* (2000) doesn't rely on vertical marks per se, the vertical shape of its support is integral to its power.

Perhaps the worst that can be said of Fishman's new work is that it adds little to the pictorial investigations begun by the Abstract Expressionists over fifty years ago. She is an artist laboring within a tradition, and, at least technically, she seems content not to push beyond its conventions. Happily for her, the art world today has abandoned any sense of its own direction: it is open to virtually any style or approach—be it fruitful or fraudulent—and that circumstance means that an artist as unfashionable as Fishman can now find her audience.

—*Daniel Kunitz*

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Music

The sorrow & the pity

by David Mermelstein

Wagner's *Parsifal* stands alone in the operatic canon. No other opera is so fraught with interpretive perils, so encumbered by tradition, so undermined by preconceptions as this one. Wagner called this work a *Bühenweihfestspiel*, a uniquely German term that can be variously translated as "stage dedication play" or "festival play for the consecration of a stage." The appellation is significant because *Parsifal* was the only one of Wagner's operas to premiere at his specially designed Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, in 1882. Indeed, *Parsifal* was composed with the hall's sonic peculiarities in mind. Given that the opera was also, in effect, the great composer's final testament (he died six months after its premiere), *Parsifal* has always been favored by Wagner cultists as the apogee of Holy German Art. (This term, which the composer explicitly celebrated in his penultimate opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, was implicitly embodied, at least in Wagner's mind, in his own music.)

Then there are the opera's pseudo-religious aspects. It is, after all, set among the knights of the Holy Grail. More importantly, the opera's central theme (musically, dramatically, and metaphorically) is one of redemption. Thus it is perhaps easy to understand why staging this opera outside Bayreuth—at a remove from the holy of holies, if you will—was once hotly debated, and why some still argue whether the conclusion of this music drama ought to be greeted with applause or stoic silence.

Wagner himself worked hard to build the mythology surrounding *Parsifal*, hoping to suggest that it was at least quasi-divinely inspired. In his autobiography, Wagner wrote of the day in 1857 that he first conceived the opera.

> I suddenly remembered that the day was Good Friday, and I called to mind the significance this omen had already once assumed for me when I was reading Wolfram's *Parsifal*. Since the sojourn in Marienbad, where I had conceived the *Meistersinger* and *Lohengrin*, I had never occupied myself again with that poem; now its noble possibilities struck me with overwhelming force, and out of my thoughts about Good Friday I rapidly conceived a whole drama, of which I made a rough sketch with a few dashes of the pen, dividing the whole into three acts.

Modern scholarship confirms that the first prose sketch of the opera dates from 1857, but disputes Wagner's Good Friday claim. Regardless, the inspiration came from Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic thirteenth-century romance *Parzival*, a poem that runs to nearly 25,000 lines. Wagner completed his first prose draft in 1865 and a second in 1877. The music was composed between 1877 and 1879. The opera's prelude was orchestrated in 1878 and the rest of the score between 1879 and early 1882.

Since World War II, perceptions of *Parsifal* have shifted. The work's religious as-

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pirations, which Wagner and his immediate heirs assiduously cultivated, have been mothballed to make room for new, often trendy, interpretations. As with recent productions of the *Ring* cycle and *Tristan und Isolde*, assorted "isms" (capitalism, Marxism, feminism) have colored stagings of *Parsifal*. It is an open question whether audiences agree, but directors clearly find useful such points of tangency with the modern world. Yet this increased sophistication has not necessarily produced a more meaningful appreciation of *Parsifal*. Indeed, Wagner's luminous score and compassionate libretto refute much of this encrustation. It was, therefore, with mixed emotions that one greeted a new production of *Parsifal* at the San Francisco Opera in June.[1] Nikolaus Lehnhoff's staging took significant liberties, especially in the third act, and its post-apocalyptic "look" (far from innovative at this juncture) suggested an eagerness to appear au courant at the expense of good sense and artistic truth. But even the ill-judged aspects of Lehnhoff's production could not entirely compromise the opera's spirit. And thanks to some able singers and Donald Runnicles's expert and heartfelt conducting in the pit, the audience could revel in precisely the sort of *Mitleid* ("compassion") that Wagner intended this transcendent work to convey.

Taking some of Wagner's metaphors to extremes, Lehnhoff, in collaboration with Raimund Bauer (sets) and Wolfgang Göbbel (lighting), made Montsalvat, the home of the Knights of the Grail, a barren place, with rocks and gravel scattered about. Only some battered chairs (quite the rage these days), placed randomly on the stage, acknowledged that ritual gatherings occurred here; banished entirely was the popular image of a circular dais upon which the grail is periodically venerated. The knights themselves looked like war-ravaged refugees thanks to Andrea Schmidt-Futterer's gray costumes, employing the now-hackneyed convention of linking Wagner to German militarism. Parsifal, by contrast, resembled a rakish Douglas Fairbanks in the silent adventure film *The Black Pirate*. And Kundry, one of opera's ultimate hard-luck cases and the only significant female character in *Parsifal*, seemed clothed in a garment rejected by one of the lesser *Cats* road companies.

Occasionally portions of the backdrop opened to reveal a spinning boulder (the earth writ small?) or some other gimmick vaguely suggesting science-fiction, but these were largely empty attempts to keep directorial stasis at bay. Not surprisingly given this bleak aesthetic, Klingsor's garden, that black-magical domain of entrapment where the second act is set, was more desolate moonscape than lush locale of fantasy and cruelty. More significant were Lehnhoff's third-act manipulations, which moved well beyond design concerns.

The most striking of the director's interpolations was the presence of railroad tracks running through Montsalvat, essentially emerging from darkness and ending abruptly on the middle of the stage. Metaphors leap quickly to mind—the end of line, first of all. But there are other, darker, suggestions, too. In this post-Holocaust era, abandoned railroad tracks take on a nefarious tint; they remind us of places like Auschwitz and Treblinka. And it hardly seems a stretch to assume that Lehnhoff was drawing clichéd parallels between Wagner and the Third Reich, yet another of the knee-jerk links to have become practically de rigueur on today's opera stages. Wagner equals death, as it were, even though, to Wagner, anyway, *Parsifal* represented the firmest affirmation of life.

Arguably less galling, but certainly more puzzling, was the opera's concluding episode. Traditionally, the now-empowered and enlightened Parsifal returns to Montsalvat, where a wizened Gurnemanz anoints him king of the knights. Parsifal then bap-

1 This production, a collaboration with the English National Opera and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, ran from June 18 to July 2 at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco. The performance discussed here occurred on June 24.

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tizes the cursed Kundry, who shortly thereafter dies, having achieved the grace she has long sought. In Lehnhoff's production, Kundry does not die. Indeed, after Parsifal heals Amfortas's wound with the spear he captured from Klingsor, Kundry and the new king walk purposefully along the railroad tracks into the darkness, quite literally strolling, if not riding, into the sunset. One wonders if Lehnhoff may have felt he was performing a public service, for in the third act of *Lohengrin*, the title character, under some duress, announces that his father is Parsifal. Now thanks to Lehnhoff, we know who Lohengrin's mother is as well.

It fell to the musicians, then, to lend this *Parsifal* depth of feeling, to say nothing of intelligence. As Gurnemanz, the work's conscience, the German bass Kurt Moll matched an especially dignified characterization to his resonant vocalism in a moving and complete portrayal. Moll made his American operatic debut in this role at the War Memorial Opera House back in 1974, and time has for the most part been kind to his instrument. One can't help but hope he will continue to sing this role well into the future. Catherine Malfitano seems a natural Kundry in so many ways. She is a fine actress, frequently delivering performances of stunning fierceness. In this production, she managed her low notes better than her high ones, and she occasionally compromised her diction by biting down on the consonants. Still, hers was an invigorating, impassioned performance.

In the pivotal and difficult role of Parsifal, the English tenor Christopher Ventris mixed fresh-voiced ardor with sonic power to excellent effect. Parsifal is described to Amfortas in a vision as "*durch Mitleid wissend, der reine Tor*" ("a pure fool made wise through pity"), and Ventris, in something of a high-wire act, portrayed him as such without mawkishness. His diction was uniformly crisp, and he displayed a rare gift for communicating the essence of Wagner's sometimes distended libretto. Equally apt in a very different role was the German bass-baritone Franz Grundheber, whose Amfortas was a character one couldn't help but pity. Grundheber, his estimable vocal resources fully deployed, was especially adept at conveying Amfortas's persistent pain, but he accomplished this in a bracing, rather than whining, manner. The talented baritone Tom Fox had the unenviable task of singing Klingsor looking very much like a macabre jack-in-the-box, but his voice was clear and forceful despite the costume. And the German bass Reinhard Hagen lent his powerful, ringing voice to Titurel, Amfortas's superannuated father. Runnicles, the SFO's gifted music director, united these forces with those in the pit, conducting with the abundant affection one expects from him in Wagner's scores, a corner of the repertory he has grandly staked as his own. What the orchestra occasionally lacked in accuracy, it made up for in unabashed feeling.

Opera audiences have begrudgingly learned to accept, though they do not generally embrace, productions in which the emphasis is more on cant than on art. What makes such exercises bearable, though, is the stubborn persistence of genuine craft amid insipid faddishness. In this staging of *Parsifal*, inspired music-making triumphed over a weak and misguided production. Ultimately, that is the performer's responsibility, to make audiences appreciate art for art's sake.

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The media

The joke's on us

by James Bowman

My favorite *Washington Post* headline of this election season, which appeared above an article by Terry M. Neal and Ceci Connolly on the morning before the second presidential debate, read: "Debate Challenges Are Same as Before." As I have had occasion to notice in this space in the past, the *Post* hardly even bothers to keep up the pretence anymore that much of what appears in its front section is news, as the term would traditionally have been understood. Either the paper is uncovering some new and recondite racial or "gender" imbalance of which even its alleged victims have scarcely been aware hitherto or, as here, crack political reporters are being given their heads to do what nowadays crack political reporters are more and more expected to do—that is, not to report the news but to interpret the spin, even if it's already been interpreted countless times before.

It cannot be stated often enough that these reporters are therefore engaged in a symbiotic relationship with their subjects. The candidates provide the spin in order for it to be interpreted by the reporters, who therefore require that the spin be supplied in the first place. I often wonder how this kind of thing strikes the average reader—assuming that for once the average reader doesn't simply skip over such articles. Is he grateful for the reporters' political acumen in telling him what to think about the campaigns' official actions or pronouncements? Or is there, as I fancy is more likely, a vague sense of disgust at being excluded from the nice, cosy spinning-and-unspinning operation which assumes, at both ends, that the reader is a slightly dim pupil at the back of this particular pedagogical emporium?

I do not mean to disparage the talents of Neal and Connolly, who were only doing what the whole politico-media culture was doing about the debates, but—well, just read a bit of their piece:

> A week has passed, but little has changed. On the eve of their second debate, Vice President Gore and George W. Bush face many of the same challenges that dominated last week's encounter in Boston.
>
> Strategists from both campaigns, presidential scholars, focus groups and party leaders agree that support has not crystallized around either candidate. Gore still has problems related to his demeanor, while Bush has yet to prove that he has the intellectual heft to be a good president.
>
> Broadly speaking, Gore comes here for Wednesday night's 90-minute debate at Wake Forest University needing to present a calmer, more human side that shows he can relate to the average American, the analysts said. No loud sighs, no interrupting, fewer statistics and more anecdotes.
>
> As one Gore adviser, speaking from Gore's debate camp in Florida, put it: "We want him to be more conversational; he was too detailed. We want him to show passion rather than [be a?] policy wonk."

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> For Bush, the goal is to demonstrate his grasp of public policy, especially his own ideas. Some of his advisers concede his description of his tax and Social Security proposals could have been better, while his critics suggest that some of his claims were incorrect.
>
> "A command of the facts is what gives you confidence," said John J. Pitney Jr., an associate professor at Claremont McKenna College. "If you're flailing away on details, it's going to show in your demeanor and body language."

And so on and so forth for over a thousand words. And yet, we might ask ourselves, what other sort of analysis was possible of a debate whose substance turned out to be summed up by both candidates' enthusiastic agreement that they were against corruption and in favor of the Golden Rule?

Virtually all the television commentary on the debates was in the Neal-Connolly vein —that is, it sounded more like drama criticism than political analysis. Content was paid attention to only insofar as one candidate or the other could be caught out in an impolitic remark or, better still, a lie, distortion, or misstatement of fact. Knowing that they were being judged in this way, the candidates, too, had obviously little or no interest in substantive debate or discussion. Each ignored the questions of the moderator, the ineffectual and overawed Jim Lehrer, and took them (in keeping with the advice of the best media experts) as mere excuses for repeating over and over again their respective slogans. In the first debate, Gore repeated at least fourteen times his mantra about the Bush tax cut's going mainly to "the richest one percent" while Bush was not far behind in the number of times he mentioned his record of bipartisanship and getting things done with the help of "both Republicans and Democrats" in the Texas legislature. Remember when presidents used to be members of *political parties*?

Ah, yes, clucked the analysts. Gore was going "populist"; Bush was appealing to the undecided voters who are telling pollsters that they are fed up with "partisanship" and "incivility" in Washington. And so they were, too. But this was not news to anyone who had been paying attention, and you might have thought that some of the seemingly endless analysis of the debates in the press and on television might occasionally at least have mentioned the candidates' own inattention to substance at any level higher than that of the bumper-sticker. Not that the candidates were entirely to blame for keeping the level of discourse as low as possible. The intense media focus on matters of manner, style, and appearance has made eschewing serious discussion and appealing to the most simple-minded of the electorate a mere matter of self-preservation.

For example, Richard Lowry, the editor of *National Review*, amusingly observed that he noticed something missing when he was watching the vice presidential debate between "Dick" Cheney and "Joe" Lieberman. It took him awhile to realize that what was missing was his own sense of dread and apprehension that his man might at any moment make some ghastly faux pas that would sink his candidacy forever. But this feeling was not merely because he was backing Bush, who might have been thought more mistake-prone. Gore supporters must have felt the same. When other commentators observed that the vice-presidential candidates looked more presidential than Gore and Bush, it wasn't because of any inherent superiority of the former in terms of gravitas or judgment over the latter. It was simply that they could risk more substance (not much more but a noticeable amount) because there was less at stake.

For as Dan Quayle showed in 1988 when he blundered his way into comparing himself to our thirty-fifth president thus inviting Lloyd Bentsen's stinging retort about his being no Jack Kennedy, a vice-presidential candidate can even crash and burn, committing a dreaded but secretly hoped-for "gaffe," and not wreck the ticket's prospects. Not so the presidential principals,

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who seem to have no choice but to play the media's game of Russian roulette. The ethos of politics-as-entertainment which has swallowed up all of television news and most of the print media as well has made the presidential debate into nothing but a political stock car race in which watching the contestants circle the same track over and over and over again is only made tolerable by the thrilling prospect, somewhere between fear and hope, that one of them will make a mistake, spin out of control and be killed—perhaps incinerated into the bargain—in a horrible pile-up.

Some, surely, of the phalanx of reporters and commentators pressed into service to interpret for the rest of us the real meaning of the debates must have tuned in just before them, as I did, to C-SPAN radio's rebroadcast of the Nixon-Kennedy debates of 1960. To listen to them was to be made forcefully aware of the extent to which the media culture has altered our politics over the past forty years. Nixon and Kennedy, that is, had something like a real debate. It was not remarkable for intellect or style, but the candidates listened to each other and answered each other's points, as well as the questions of the moderator. They spoke of real matters of national and international concern and did not speak about them as if to a class of second-graders. They were addressing an audience which, they could assume, knew something about economics, foreign policy, diplomacy, and recent American political history. The level of discourse may not have been Demosthenean, but it was at least as remote from that of our own political culture as it was from Demosthenes'.

According to a report in *The New York Times* on October 16 by David D. Kirkpatrick, when their language was submitted to the Flesch-Kincaid test of "reading level" by Professor Robert Beard of Bucknell University, this year's debates registered on the scale at somewhere between the seventh- and eighth-grade levels. According to the professor, the Nixon-Kennedy debates were roughly at the tenth-grade level while the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 were at the twelfth-grade level (though some of us may have our doubts as to the ability of an average twelfth grader of today to make head or tail of them, we should remember that this is a notional scale and that the average twelfth grader is not necessarily a reader at the twelfth-grade level). Neither Mr. Kirkpatrick nor Professor Beard is inclined to view this development in our nation's public life with alarm, however:

> Speaking at a low reading level is in some ways a measure of success for a politician in an age of the mass media (writes the former), since less-challenging usage is accessible to more of the electorate. "The lower reading level shows they are more interested in people who are going to vote than in history and posterity," Professor Beard said. "You wouldn't simplify your speech to impress intellectuals or to appear statesmanlike."

Quite so. But maybe the average voter would be even more impressed were a candidate to treat him more like an intellectual than an imbecile. Has anyone tried it during the last forty years?

Part of the reason for this dumbing-down (which is considerably understated by the professor, since the Flesch-Kincaid test cannot measure relevance and coherence within a particular context) has been the general decline of educational standards. Nowadays it is increasingly unlikely that anyone but a specialist would know enough about subjects once thought to constitute the common property of the educated general reader to listen with patience to the Nixon-Kennedy debates. But those debates themselves—or rather what every journalist thinks he knows about them—provide a clue as to another reason. Again and again we have been told that those who listened on radio are supposed to have thought Nixon "won," while those who watched on television are supposed to have thought that Kennedy "won." Hence the assumption of the triumph of television and its natural

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emphasis on appearance and style at the expense of content. Q.E.D.

But this bit of folk wisdom, for which there is no real contemporaneous or scholarly evidence, strikes me rather as being the result of reading into the political culture of 1960 the assumptions of today. It is simply trotted out and repeated every four years in order to give a kind of warrant for the analysts of today and their belief in the axiom that the performance is all. The very idea of "winning" or "losing" the debate (now enshrined in the instant poll numbers that are posted on the networks half-an-hour after they are over) is a highly dubious one. If Nixon had won the 1960 election, as he very nearly did, would we still think it so obvious that Kennedy had won the debates? The much sought-after mistakes and gaffes often appear only in retrospect, after one candidate or another has already been certified as the loser and we must go in search of the reasons why he lost.

A miniature demonstration of this wisdom-after-the-fact was afforded by the aftermath of the first debate. Not only the commentators and analysts proclaimed Gore the winner, but so did the instant polls afterwards. Yet by the time of the second debate, just over a week later, everyone was talking about the bad impression Gore had made by being too heavily made up, too aggressive at jumping into the conversation with his opinion or an ostentatious knowledge of facts, and too unsportsmanlike in the sighing and the rolling of his eyes in response to his opponent's assertions. None of these things had been thought particularly important by the commentators I watched on the night of the debate, though they were, I'm sure, as good commentators as any.

True, it later emerged that on one or two occasions during the debate Gore had also memorially "embellished" his past, as he has been known to do before—remembering a trip to Texas with the director of FEMA which he had not taken and claiming that a schoolgirl in Sarasota, Florida, had to stand in class because of overcrowding when it was in fact for only one day, as a result of the installation of some new lab equipment. Some thought that this reversion, however slight, to the fabulist tendencies which have made him a laughingstock at times in the past also damaged him. But what we know for sure is that in the course of the week the polls showed Gore losing support and Bush gaining. As it is presumably inconceivable that a victory in "debate" should not be directly translated into an advantage in the polls, some reason had to be found for Gore's loss of his.

Also in between the first two debates there was the wicked parody of Gore's debating style on "Saturday Night Live," which might have been an early harbinger of a disastrous shift in the media's idea about "The Story" on the vice president. Ever since his performance at the Democratic convention The Story had been one of a man with a reputation for stiffness and uninspired policy "wonkery" who was loosening up and becoming a recognizable human being. At least the jokes about his stiffness lost some of their edge. Meanwhile, Bush's early "gaffes" were helping to solidify The Story on him as a nincompoop who depended entirely on his—and his father's—advisers. As Marshall Sella wrote in a cover article on political comedy for *The New York Times Magazine* of September 24: "The masks are indelible now, and it has come down to the Dunce versus the Robot"—which was bad news for Bush, since "being called Dumb is more devastating than being called Stiff."

"Nothing that happens in the coming debates," Sella confidently concluded, "will alter these portrayals." Yet after the first debate the big friendly Robot suddenly changed into a creep and a "nerd." While Bush did not altogether escape from his own characterization as a dummy, his managing to avoid saying anything blatantly stupid in the first two debates made his stupidity seem more benign, while the obnoxiousness of Gore's nerdishness grew as his poll numbers weakened. Howard Kurtz

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of *The Washington Post* chronicled the birth of an instant stereotype under the heading of "Revenge of the B Students"—

> What is it about Al Gore that makes the pundit class flash back to high school?
>
> - "Still the hard-working student once trotted out by his parents to please the grown-up guests"
>   —*Time*'s Nancy Gibbs
> - "He reverts to his smartest-guy-in-the-class mode, impressing the teacher with factoids for extra credit"
>   —*Time*'s Margaret Carlson
> - "Clearly the smartest boy in the class, ready to show off his stuff on just about any subject"
>   —Cokie and Steve Roberts
> - "He slipped into his smartest-kid-in-the-class mode, a quality that has damaged him in the past"
>   —*New York Daily News*
> - "Gore . . . can't resist the urge to behave like the smartest kid in class—you know, the one who is constantly raising his hand and shouting the answers before the teacher even finishes asking the questions"
>   —*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*
> - "The [first] debate displayed Gore at his most medicinal, his apple-polishing, hall-monitor worst"
>   —*The Washington Post*'s Marjorie Williams
> - "A Teacher's Pet from hell"
>   —*The New York Times*'s Maureen Dowd
> - "The obnoxious smartest guy in class"
>   —*Fox News*'s Fred Barnes
>
> An A for groupthink, perhaps?

Kurtz could have added several more examples, including a brilliant cartoon by Tom Toles of *The Buffalo News* who imagined the candidates as two boys sitting at two adjacent schoolroom desks. Gore is waving his hand about and saying: "I know the answer! I know *all* the answers! I invented the answer!" Next to him Bush holds open a textbook on "Government" beneath which we can see peeping out a Batman comic. There is a large question mark above his head. Beneath Toles has written: "Nearly time to call on one of them." while the little cartoonist in the corner remarks: "The case for education reform."

Yet this is not just "groupthink." It is the way the media always and inevitably works in its coverage of politics. Perhaps this has always been so, but what is different now is that no one in the media or out of it seems inclined to feel ashamed of taking such a superficial view of what has historically been considered a serious subject. This is the point of Marshall Sella's piece, which runs to over eight-thousand words and begins with an account of a "bright and well versed" junior at Davidson College named Alexis Boehmler whose "primary news source—often, her only news source—is 'The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,' a parody." Without any apparent irony, Sella has Miss Boehmler delighting in her learning from that show, which runs on Comedy Central, that George W. Bush is "a moron" and "an ignorant mouthpiece."

But why should he censure her for her facile opinion, self-confessedly based on nothing but a comedy show, when *The New York Times* itself encourages just such facile views from the three political stars of its op-ed page, Maureen Dowd, Gail Collins, and Frank Rich? These three have all reached their journalistic pinnacle by writing in a style and with a sensibility as close as possible to that of the late-night comedians whom Sella sees as setting the tone for this campaign. I think he is wrong about this. I think the comedians have only risen to such prominence because they are doing more or less what the rest of the media is doing—and with exactly the same bias, which Sella admits is decidedly left of center—but they are doing it with better joke writers.

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George Orwell: changing the climate

by David Pryce-Jones

Under the spreading chestnut tree
I sold you and you sold me.

"Orwellian" has entered the vocabulary as a shorthand adjective for the abiding fear of the twentieth century, that we would all become unpersons at the mercy of Big Brother. A jackboot would be stamping on the human face for ever, in George Orwell's unforgettable image. Franz Kafka is the only other writer to have given his name to a personal vision of our dehumanized age. We can only wonder yet again at the almost miraculous strength of imagination whereby two such unlikely individuals were able to envisage a totalitarian future with such clarity and brio that they also distilled antidotes.

Both writers were evidently defending themselves against victimization. Kakfa was perhaps born a victim, if only of his nervous system. Not so Orwell. With his gaunt face, wavy hair, and sergeant-major's moustache, he was combative. He was often rude to people, sometimes to their face, glad to abuse the likes of Auden and Spender as "pansies," brutally dismissive in print of books he judged worthless. He struck people—for instance once fighting with a drunken Rayner Heppenstall—and he nurtured fantasies about bayoneting the Burmese and Indians whom in his early career he was policing. Yet his imagination contradictorily placed him on the side of victims. He was outraged by bullying at school, by society's indifference to the poor, by colonial repression, by the tyranny of fascism and Communism. The lesser cruelties wove seamlessly into the greater.

There was a side to him which enjoyed solitude, gardening, fishing, and do-it-yourself carpentry, but soon moral indignation got the better of him, and he was back at the typewriter for ten angry hours at a stretch. Never a natural storyteller, his early novels and books of reportage are about "[h]ardness and injustice, violence and oppression," as Jeffrey Meyers puts it. Identification with victims everywhere and always is the mark of his singular nobility and greatness.

Where did the energy and sense of outrage come from? In his highly professional and readable new biography, Jeffrey Meyers draws on all the information left by those who knew Orwell in one context or another.[1] It supersedes the other biographies. Emphasis is placed on scenes of symbolic weight, as when after an air raid during the Blitz that destroyed his flat Orwell dug his books out of the rubble and trundled them in a wheelbarrow across London; or when, towards the end of his life, he and his companions almost drowned in a whirlpool off the coast of Jura. Meyers also provides fascinating detail, for example that throughout the war the BBC continued to pay Hitler

1 *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation*, by Jeffrey Meyers; W. W. Norton, 320 pages, $29.95.

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royalties for quotations from *Mein Kampf*, and that for the French edition of *Animal Farm* the pig Napoleon was renamed César. Orwell's one and only prize came from *Partisan Review*, and it was worth a thousand dollars. In the year of its title, by contrast, *1984* was selling a thousand paperbacks a day in the United States.

But where Orwell's motivation is concerned, Meyers sticks to what has long been the orthodox opinion that Orwell was engaged in a revolt against his background, and especially its conventionality and privilege. The word "guilt" is a drumbeat through these pages. Guilt supposedly drove him to accuse and punish himself, becoming a tramp and outcast, not bothering with elementary precautions to protect his person or his health, but exposing himself instead to a bullet through the throat in the Spanish Civil War and death from tuberculosis at the age of forty-seven. Orwell's masochistic frame of mind, Meyers judges, prompted "the inner need to sabotage his chance for a happy life." A powerful fuel, guilt might certainly be the cause of the pattern of deliberate self-destruction which Meyers draws. But there is another possible interpretation, and Fred Warburg, the publisher of *Animal Farm* and *1984*, may have put his finger on it when he said, "Orwell wrote without regard to being popular and without fear of being detested." Is that not pride, a very different thing from guilt? To place oneself deliberately down among the victims seems the act of a free spirit, someone both humane and defiant, with no need to justify his actions to anyone except himself.

Biographers of Orwell, Meyers included, pooh-pooh Orwell's parents as so limited and class-bound that he had to escape his background. But the family silver nevertheless accompanied him through life (sometimes he usefully pawned it), and he also liked to hang the portrait of an eighteenth-century ancestress, Lady Mary Blair, wherever he lived. Biographers, Meyers again included, depict him as an oddball at Eton, someone untouched by five years of education at that unique school. Eton gives its pupils the confidence to be themselves, which may be justified or misplaced—I am myself speaking as an Etonian—but in either case it carries a disdain for the opinions of others which qualifies as aristocratic.

On the evidence, Orwell rose above self-inflicted poverty and guilt to be a man who knew his worth and even to have been reasonably content within the limits of bad health and high ambition. Meyers does justice to the marriage with Eileen O'Shaughnessy, to whose devotion and sacrifices Orwell owed a great deal. Quoted here, she writes movingly to Orwell from her hospital deathbed that she was irritated with herself for being a model patient. He missed her badly. He loved the son they adopted. There is something wonderfully grave and gawky about his approaches to other women. On his own deathbed, he married Sonia Brownell, immortalized in *1984* as Julia, the sexy heroine of what was mocked in the novel as the Junior Anti-Sex League. Whether Sonia married Orwell for mercenary reasons or out of pity is a question Meyers leaves open.

Orwell's enlisting to fight on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War had set the course for the rest of his brief life. To the political innocent that he still was, the war at first had appeared as a clear-cut issue of democratic right versus fascist wrong. In the field, he saw for himself that the Communists were not the democrats or idealists they pretended to be, but cynics, power-maniacs, and murderers, out to kill those they could not control. Only the fluke that he happened to be in the hospital after his bullet wound saved him from the firing squad. Others had already reported the crimes and slave labor camps of the Soviet Union, but they were Russians or Eastern Europeans. *Homage to Catalonia* in 1938 was the first depiction of Communism in action from someone accessible and believable, an English witness with a prose style exactly suited to the truth he had to tell. In due

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course, contributions from Arthur Koestler and Albert Camus down to Alexander Solzhenitsyn were to complete the exposure of Communism as the criminal conspiracy of a self-chosen elite against the rest of mankind. But it was Orwell who began the immense task of changing the intellectual climate of the day.

"Why do we all, seeing a Red, feel small?," the poet Cecil Day-Lewis asked (and Meyers quotes) in a tragicomic sample of the abasement of intellectuals before Communism. Under central instruction from Moscow, Communists and their sympathizers carefully crafted deceptions about themselves, poisoning the whole period. In particular, they maintained that Communism was the opposite of fascism. These totalitarian systems were not rivals, Orwell insisted, but two evils of a kind, to be resisted equally. His central position was that "totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere."

Seeing a Red or a Nazi, Orwell felt scorn and danger. A critic of conservative England and a declared socialist, he could not be convincingly smeared as reactionary or fascist. Indifference to the opinions of others was a prime expression of courage, and the best guarantee that the public would eventually accept the truth of his insights into totalitarianism. All the same, it was touch and go for some time, as Soviet sympathizers did what they could to suppress him. One such was Kingsley Martin, editor of the *New Statesman*, who refused to publish his articles about Spain. Seeing him in a restaurant, Orwell insisted on changing his place as the sight of so corrupt a face would spoil his lunch. Victor Gollancz and even T. S. Eliot rejected his books for fear of offending the Soviet Union and its appeasers. Unusually in someone so painstaking, Meyers does not refer to the systematic campaign of vilification which Communists everywhere waged against Orwell, labeling him in the media "an enemy of the people" who deserved to be shot.

Animal Farm and *1984* exposed the reality of Communism and its collaborators at the moment when the Cold War was taking shape, and the West had not yet decided on its response. Occupied by the Red Army, Eastern Europe was already in the Soviet bloc, and Communist revolution was a possibility in several Western European countries. Orwell projected what would then happen, the bloodshed and fear, the betrayals of lovers and friends and ideals, the substitution of lies for truth, the reordering of morality and manners, and the language in which to express these things.

Those who polemicized directly against Communism made little or no impact. Orwell's two books succeeded because they are satires so fully conceived that they ring true, "beautiful" as he said of his work, often humorous, often sad, in defense of everything humane. Czeslaw Milosz, the future Nobel Prize poet then still living in his native Poland, was the first to wonder how Orwell could have known so well what it was like to live under Communism. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, others testified that Orwell's imagination and courage had inspired them too. One form or another of totalitarianism survives here or there in the world and probably always will, but art at this level is a lasting defense and saving grace.

Slim pickings

Charles Kessler, editor and translator
Berlin in Lights:
The Diaries of Harry Kessler.
Grove Press, 560 pages, $35

reviewed by John Derbyshire

Germany, let's face it, did not have a good century. To start one war and lose it might be misfortune: to do the same thing twice looks very much like carelessness. And wars aside, there is the dreadful, indelible blot of the Holocaust. It needs some effort of imagination to see how surprising all this would appear to a time traveler from 1900. Germany came into the twentieth century very

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hopefully. She was, by general agreement, the best-educated nation in Europe, and by no means the most anti-Semitic (I think the 1900 ranking would have been: Russia, France, Austria-Hungary, Germany). Her philosophers were read everywhere—German philosophy *was* philosophy. German—or, at any rate, German-speaking—composers dominated the concert halls and opera houses. Germany's scientists and mathematicians filled the front rank of those disciplines. (This reviewer took his first degree in mathematics from a good English university. The ability to read German was a prerequisite.) The growth of German industry after 1871 had been remarkable—a "Teutonic tiger," we should say nowadays. A meritocratic civil service administered a prototypical welfare state with quiet efficiency.

There were some warning signs, to be sure, and a few very percipient observers picked them up: the coarse philistinism of university student associations and the uncritical worship of state power taught by too many of the professors; the shallow militaristic bumptiousness of Kaiser Wilhelm II; the odd disengagement of writers and artists from the society that sustained them; the crude suppression of leftist social movements; the severely restricted power of parliaments; and the extraordinary determination to keep women in their place. But those things are much easier to see in hindsight. Taken all in all, Germany viewed from the perspective of a century ago offered more grounds for hope than for fear. That everything went so horribly wrong needs much explaining, much understanding.

The diaries of Harry Graf Kessler offer some modest insights into this conundrum. This English-language edition covers a period from November 6, 1918 to September 30, 1937, two months before the diarist's death at age sixty-nine. Kessler kept more diary than that, though how much more is not clear to me. He himself, in an entry dated June 16, 1933, notes: "Thirty-five years ago I started this diary." Yet a web site for the Schiller Museum at Marbach, which has a Kessler project under way, states: "Kessler kept a diary almost without interruption across six decades (1880–1937)." Amazon.com's German-language site lists only *Tagebücher 1918–37*, so perhaps the earlier diaries are lost, or have never been published.

Whatever the case, we have here an edited translation (the German *Tagebücher* is listed as having 855 pages, so roughly a third has fallen to the editor's scissors) dealing with the brief revolutionary period following the 1918 armistice, then the Weimar Republic and the early years of the Third Reich. Kessler was an aesthete, an art collector, a minor diplomat, a publisher of fine limited-edition books, and a familiar—or at least a nodding acquaintance—of most of the artistic and literary figures of Europe during the inter-war years. He was wealthy, and his wealth seems to have been very soundly established, unperturbed by the economic horrors of the period. He records paying an English physician £350 for three-and-a-half days of attention in 1926, three years after the great inflation that wiped out much of the German *rentier* class, and at a time when an English working man made £3 a week. Kessler was cosmopolitan—fluent in German, French and English, and at least capable in Italian.

I had better confess before going further that I found this book a very dry read. I could not like Harry Kessler, nor could I dislike him—he presents too little of himself for one to form much of an opinion. Ian Buruma, in his introduction, tells us that Kessler was homosexual. There is no direct evidence of this in the diaries—there is very little of an "interior" nature at all—but neither is there anything to contradict it, and the rather guarded, detached style of the diaries is certainly what one would expect from a homosexual of Kessler's generation and background. Supposing Buruma is right, I should guess that Kessler's homosexuality was of the more fastidious sort. I cannot imagine that it expressed itself much in action—though this is, of course, an area full of surprises. Here is Kessler at the first

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night of Cocteau's *Orphée*:

> The part [of the angel] is played by a revoltingly mawkish, effeminate young man who appears to have escaped from some dreadful hairdresser's. This sugary youth completely spoiled my taste for [the production].

Kessler's closest female acquaintance was his sister Wilhelmina. In this he resembled Nietzsche. In fact he knew Nietzsche to some degree—it is not clear from the diaries exactly how—and remained on good terms with Elisabeth Nietzsche after her brother's death. (She is indexed under her married name of Foerster.) There is an affecting moment in the diary entry for August 7, 1932, when he called on Elisabeth in Weimar:

> We talked in the small parlour on the first floor. Through the connecting door I had a view of the sofa where Nietzsche sat, looking like an ailing eagle, the last time I saw him; our conversation made a deep impression on me. Mysterious, incomprehensible Germany.

Kessler noted the death of his mother (who was Irish) in September 1919 and declared himself "very depressed"; but he did not attend the funeral. That's pretty much it for women. His closest male acquaintance—one hesitates to use so strong a word as "friend" in speaking of Kessler's attachments—was the sculptor Aristide Maillol. Maillol provides a rare moment of comedy when, in 1930, he accompanies Kessler from Paris to Weimar, taking along his young and high-spirited model. Maillol was the same age as Kessler, and the young woman seems to have been too much for him. Furthermore, he had a wife in Paris who had previously caught him in an embrace with the young lady, and is deeply suspicious of all his doings, so that the flight has to be arranged with some subterfuge. The whole silly business is over in a page or two, but it enlivens a book otherwise nearly devoid of what news editors call "human interest." Almost the only other patch of humor is Kessler's response to a woman who asked him "what the word *pédéraste*, which she so frequently hears applied here [they are in Paris], means. I advised her to ask her husband." (This is so dry as to be positively English. Compare, in fact, the episode from Mrs. Thrale's *Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson*: "Mr Johnson told me that at a friend's house he had been one evening talking over some theological subjects—the room was full—a young lady said to him: Now pray dear Sir tell us what was that circumcision we so read of—Ask your Mama tomorrow Miss, said he."

Thus the appeal of Kessler's diaries is principally historical, resting mainly on their account of the times the diarist lived through, and on sketches of well-known people. Yet even here I found the pickings slim. Some great events are omitted altogether. In the entries for 1923, for example, there is a blank from April 24th to December 23rd, a period which included both Hitler's farcical Beer Hall Putsch of November 8th and the great hyperinflation that so demoralized the Weimar Republic. (On November 15, 1923 the mark was quoted at 4.2 trillion to the dollar, up from 18 thousand in January.) There is a widespread opinion that the republic was generally popular until the inflation, fatally weakened thereafter. Kessler seemed to believe this himself. In June 1922 he wrote that "Firm adherence to the Republic [is] a far more deeply-rooted emotion than prewar monarchical 'patriotism' was." Three years later, following the election of Hindenburg to the presidency: "Farewell progress, farewell vision of a new world." If the great inflation was indeed such a turning-point in the fortunes of the republic, it would have been nice to hear something about it first-hand.

Kessler's political instincts are mostly sensible, and his political heroes—Walther Rathenau, Gustav Streseman—are those one hopes one would have favored oneself: sane and capable men struggling valiantly against rising forces of violence and madness. Like many aristocrats, Kessler had a weakness for socialism, but not enough of

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one to undermine his basic good judgment. He detested Nazism, of course. The feeling was mutual, and Kessler was effectively an exile, in danger of his life in Germany, from the time of the elections following the Reichstag fire (February 1933) until his death. He seems to have been personally admirable: a man of solid integrity and physical courage—does one of these ever exist without the other? During the Spartacist uprising of 1919: "When the shooting began again I was proceeding towards the Reichstag. That was also Spartacus's line of fire. Bullets whizzed past my ear."

Kessler was a crashing snob, and I got a bit tired of his distaste for the lower-middle classes, and of offhand remarks like "Kerr [a Berlin critic], who sat listening with his vulgar little wife." On closer inspection, though, Kessler's snobbery was more aesthetic than purely social. It expressed itself most bitterly in his attitude to Wilhelm II, whom he loathed to the degree that at one point (April 3, 1923) he asserts: "In a symbolic and profound sense, William II really was Antichrist, although in his own person a very insignificant, shallow and contemptible example." This is all mixed up with his abhorrence of Wilhelmine fashions in the decorative arts. Of the official residence of the Reichstag president (November 22, 1922): "Atrocious Wilhelminian taste, oppressively florid and vulgar. The style was intimation of the catastrophe to come." You could use the diaries, in fact, to make some sort of case that sound aesthetic instincts are a better guide to the probable course of public events than is a grounding in science, history, or economics, provided that the bearer of those instincts meets some minimum standard of worldliness.

Kessler's personal sketches are mainly disappointing. Famous people—Albert Einstein, Richard Strauss, George Grosz, Virginia Woolf—are encountered, dined with, chatted to, but rarely engaged. (The exchange with Pauline Strauss—Richard's wife—on January 19, 1926 is one of the few striking counterexamples.) There are no decent anecdotes or quotations. The occasional glimpses of that decadence which is almost the only collective memory of Weimar Berlin still retained in the public mind are so coolly detached as to leave almost no impression.

> I drove to Vollmoeller's harem on the Pariser Platz. Reinhardt and Huldschinsky were surrounded by half a dozen naked girls. Miss [Josephine] Baker was also naked except for a pink muslin apron. . . . A bewitching creature, but almost quite [sic] unerotic. Watching her inspires as little sexual excitement as does the sight of a beautiful beast of prey. The naked girls lay or skipped about among the four or five men in dinner-jackets.

The translation and editing present problems, too. There is nothing wrong with the translator's English style, which is plain and robust. (The translator, by the way, is unrelated to the diarist, the identity of names pure coincidence.) He has, however, left untranslated all remarks in French—some of them quite lengthy—which is frustrating for those of us with a limited grasp of French. Presumably Charles Kessler is aiming his book at readers who are insufficiently multilingual to tackle the original German. Why does he suppose that this target audience can read French? We are far gone from the time when every educated person knew French. This is a shame, but it is a fact. It would have been nice, too, to know just what was edited out—a simple bracketed ellipsis would do as a marker. And while I understand that people have strong opinions about footnotes, I personally would have preferred more of them. What was the Canitz Society from which Kessler was asked to resign in 1925?

Reading *Berlin in Lights*, in fact, I found myself asking the question publishers often ask of aspiring authors: Who is this book *for*? Kessler's diaries are a good supplementary source for the history of the period—Gordon Craig's admirable *Germany 1866–1945*, for example, makes frequent use of them—but anyone qualified to write Ger-

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man history can surely read them in the original. I do not think the diaries can be ranked very highly as literature; Kessler's fundamental lack of interest in other human beings disqualifies them. Kessler has the virtue of being his own man, not representative of anything at all (except, of course, in the most general way, of his time) and so his observations are not without interest; but I cannot agree with Ian Buruma's estimate of the diaries as "a consummate work of art." Curious inquirers who would like a different point of view might sample Buruma's introduction, though—for my money much the best part of this book.

James Dean of fascism

Alice Kaplan The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach. University of Chicago Press, 308 pages, $25

reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers

In England, where Fascism never took hold, many of the leading modern writers —Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, Eliot, Pound, and Lawrence—were reactionaries who sympathized with that movement. In France, by contrast, the best modern authors—Gide, Malraux, Sartre, and Camus—were passionately committed to the left. Robert Brasillach (1909–45)—"the symbol of the collaborator"—was the exception. Alice Kaplan's clear, elegant account of Brasillach's career, trial, and legacy raises several important questions: "the accountability of writers and intellectuals, the power of words to do harm, the possibility of justice during wartime, and the dangers of revisionist history."

Born in Perpignan, the son of an army officer who'd been killed in a colonial skirmish in Morocco, Brasillach was educated at the elite Lycée Louis-le-Grand and the Ecole Normale Supérieure. In the 1920s he became a journalist and freelance writer for Charles Maurras's *Action Française*, which "stood for anti-Semitic nationalism, royalism and Catholicism, and for hatred of foreigners." From 1937, Brassilach edited a newspaper, *Je Suis Partout* ("I Am Everywhere"), which proudly revealed the names and addresses of French Jews hiding from the Gestapo. Kaplan describes him as short, round, with tiny shoulders and owlish spectacles, "a man of great culture and enormous charm, capable of great loyalty and friendship . . . a sparkling, feared critic, a controversial political pundit, and a cultural celebrity of the extreme right"—"the James Dean of French fascism." The dreamy, effeminate writer was also thought to be homosexual.

Brasillach vitriolically attacked the decadent Third Republic as "an old syphilitic whore, stinking of patchouli and yeast infection, still exhaling her bad odors, still standing on her sidewalk," and blamed the left for the country's malaise. But his criticism went beyond colorful metaphor, and he wanted his political enemies to be destroyed. As the Nazi occupiers' principal cultural spokesman, he romanticized their political brutality. He refused to help French writers in the Resistance, like Max Jacob and Robert Desnos, who were killed by the Germans. In his most notorious statement, he ruthlessly encouraged the deportation and murder of Jews and their children, insisting that "We must separate from the Jews en bloc and not keep any little ones."

Brasillach's stature as a writer—ideologically based on the medieval concept of "benefit of clergy," in which the literate were exempted from civil punishment—was crucial during his trial for treason. Even the indictment conceded that he was "the author of several novels of an incontestable literary value." His defense lawyer claimed he was "the finest promise of contemporary letters," and his petition for clemency called him "one of the most brilliant minds of his generation." Kaplan praises his first book, *Presence de Virgile* (1931), for its

> wide-eyed sensual style, a clear sense of chronology, a traditional assumption of a di-

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> rect relationship between a writer's life and work, a right-wing emphasis on native geography, and, especially, an unapologetic projection of his own desires that gave the story life and verve.

But it's impossible to accept this special pleading for a man who was better as a translator than poet and (as this book makes clear) wrote maudlin, sentimental novels and rabid criticism. He cruelly attacked Gide and Mauriac, accused Malraux of using melodrama in his great novel *Man's Fate* to inculcate an "unhealthy taste for heroism," and (in a passage not quoted by Kaplan) wrote of his idealistic Spanish War book *Man's Hope*: "If this novel had been composed by a Hitlero-Japanese, a lubricious viper, a Trotskyist dog, a jackal of the POUM [a Spanish anarchist party], or by an anarcho-fascist, it could certainly not be more harmful to the cause it wishes to defend." Brasillach was no André Chenier, executed by French revolutionaries during the Terror. His work, even when compared to that of the leading Fascist writers, Céline and Drieu la Rochelle (whom he also attacked), is insignificant. As Jean Cocteau aptly put it, he was both "absurd and harmful."

When Paris was liberated in August 1944, Brasillach refused to flee to Germany and went into hiding; when his mother was arrested, he gave himself up. During his trial, at once insolent and serene, he had no apologies or regrets—though he blatantly denied he had ever advocated "that families be separated, that women be separated from their children." Kaplan observes that

> By claiming, throughout his ordeal, that he was willing to pay for his actions, eager to accept his responsibility, Brasillach was both elevating his importance and encouraging his own guilty verdict.

He is remembered today for his trial rather than his work. It took place in January 1945, in recently liberated Paris, while the war was still being fought and part of the country still under German occupation. Brasillach had committed treason in writing, not action, though his writing had had fatal results. The defense argued that, in addition to his outstanding literary merit, his father had given his life "to save our country." In fact, he'd died while trying to impose French rule on wild Moroccan tribesmen.

The four jurymen—a printer, an engineer, an electrical employee, and a technician—came from the Communist-dominated working-class suburbs of Paris. Kaplan says that the illustrious literary names mentioned by the defense "were meaningless to the jury," but also states, quite unconvincingly, that when the prosecutor quoted Oscar Wilde's "the love that dares not speak its name," "most of the people in the courtroom recognized the reference."

Brasillach was convicted in a procedure that took only six hours, and was sentenced to death. A number of eminent writers —Valéry, Claudel, Aymé, and Mauriac— swayed, despite Brasillach's vicious attacks, by Christian charity and by the wish to save a fellow writer, signed a petition for clemency. Camus, torn between desire for justice and for charity, decided to sign because he opposed capital punishment. He wrote to Aymé:

> I have always been horrified by death sentences and I decided, as an individual at least, that I could not participate in one, even by abstention. . . . But I want you to tell him, from me: I did not add my signature to yours for his sake, nor for the writer, whom I consider as nothing at all, nor for the person, whom I despise with all the force that is in me.

Sartre and De Beauvoir, who believed that talent confers responsibility, ethics, and moral rectitude, refused to sign because of the French writers who had been murdered by the Germans. "By his denunciations and his calls for murder and genocide," Beauvoir wrote, "Brasillach directly collaborated with the Gestapo." De Gaulle agreed with their argument and refused to pardon Brasillach,

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who was executed by firing squad only eighteen days after the trial. He rejected a blindfold and just before they shot him cried out:

> "Vive la France quand même" [Long live France anyway]. It was a perfect last line for Brasillach, typical in its combination of ideological fervor and taste for the joke and "bon mot."

Kaplan concludes that Brasillach was guilty, but should not have been shot because "the myth of a martyred innocent gives sustenance to the extreme right" and to the Holocaust revisionists. If he had lived, the notorious criminal would not have been able to hide his Fascist past under a respectable academic disguise, like Paul de Man and Mircea Eliade. Yet in posthumous editions of Brasillach's work, the most violent passages, which encouraged the arrest of resistance writers, were quietly deleted. Had he not been executed he could, like his fanatical followers, have continued to poison the present as well as the past. The recent work of the pro-Nazi historian David Irving, who denies the Holocaust, shows that Brasillach's beliefs can still do harm.

Kaplan is perceptive and sound, excellent on the historical context and on the ambience of occupied and liberated France. But the book lacks a bibliography and needs photographs, and she makes a few surprising mistakes. There are no "states" in France; Plon was De Gaulle's publisher, not editor; and the title of Pascal's work is *Provincial Letters*, not "The Provincials." Kaplan could have illuminated Brasillach's cultural collaboration and treason by comparing them to similar Anglo-American cases. In 1916 the Irish patriot Sir Roger Casement, hoping to lead a rebellion against the British, bungled an attempt to land on the coast of Ireland in a German submarine. He was immediately captured, tried for treason, and sentenced to death. When friends circulated a petition for clemency, British Naval Intelligence published copies of his private homosexual diaries, genuine but based on fantasies rather than reality, in order to extinguish the last remnants of public sympathy. Casement, like Brasillach, was executed for homosexuality as well as for treason.

During World War II, Ezra Pound broadcast fanatical pro-Fascist and anti-Semitic propaganda on Italian radio while the Jews in Rome were being rounded up and sent to their death. But Frost, Hemingway, and MacLeish, more effective than Brasillach's supporters, quietly arranged to have Pound declared insane so that he would not have to stand trial and risk execution for treason. Like Brasillach, Pound remained unregenerate to the very end. (Oddly enough, Pound's old friend Iris Barry, who had two illegitimate children with Wyndham Lewis, translated Brasillach's *History of the Cinema*.)

Eliot greatly admired Brasillach's mentor Charles Maurras, who also was convicted of treason but only sentenced to life in prison for extenuating circumstances. As late as 1948 Eliot took Maurras as his spiritual guide and (perhaps alluding to Brasillach's book) wrote: "Maurras, pour certains d'entre nous, représentait une sorte de Virgile qui nous conduisait aux portes du temple." If Brasillach was, as Mauriac wrote, "one of the most brilliant minds of his generation" and one of the most prominent writers of his time, then something was festering and rotten in the core of French intellectual and cultural life, which made the country ripe for invasion, defeat, and occupation in 1940, as it had been in 1815, 1870, and 1914. Brasillach, thoroughly corrupt, was no great loss to French letters. Sartre and De Gaulle were right to hold him responsible for his actions.

Shorter notices

Penelope Fitzgerald The Knox Brothers. Counterpoint, 288 pages, $26

This is a welcome reissue, with a new brief preface, of a book first published in 1977,

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which rapidly became a classic in the genre of composite biography. Penelope Fitzgerald's father, Edmund Knox (1881–1971), and his three brothers, Dillwyn (1884–1943), Wilfred (1886–1950), and Ronald (1888–1957), were descended from families teeming with Christian missionaries and eccentrics. The boys—there were also two sisters, but they receive scant mention in this pre-P.C. work—inherited these qualities in abundance. Their father was the evangelical Bishop of Manchester, in the north of England, and the fascination of the story lies partly in watching the variety of ways in which heredity was shaped by circumstance. Ronald, convert to Catholicism, priest, and biblical scholar, is the best-known brother (the curious may find more about him in *The New Criterion* of September 1997). Of the rest, Edmund became the editor of the humorous weekly *Punch*; Dillwyn was a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, a classicist and cryptographer who cracked the codes used by the Nazi "Engima" machine; and Wilfred was an Anglo-Catholic priest and social crusader who ended his days as chaplain of Pembroke College, Cambridge. Brilliant members of a brilliant family, they led lives filled with shadows; for while Mrs. Fitzgerald—who herself died, sadly, this year just before this volume appeared—tells her story affectionately, with many entertaining and moving anecdotes, it is hard to resist the conclusion that something went wrong for each of these men.

An eccentric is always sure of a warm welcome in England, but there is a price to pay; the grotesque and the *outré* must be maintained at all costs. Any hint of a real person, with real feelings, beneath the façade will not be forgiven, for the eccentric's only purpose is to entertain. He, in turn, needs applause, and is lost if it stops. The Knox brothers were precocious little boys, endowed with phenomenal memories (Wilfred, as a child, could repeat the *Times* leading article word-perfect after a single reading) and exceptionally articulate; they were performers from the beginning. But their world caved in in August 1892, when their mother died at the age of thirty-eight, leaving them orphaned at the ages of eleven, eight, six, and four. Despite Bishop Knox's later, happy re-marriage, irreparable damage had been done. Edmund and Dillwyn were emotionally cauterized; Wilfred and Ronnie drew closer to each other in grief. "All needed love," Mrs. Fitzgerald shrewdly comments, "Wilfred and Ronnie because they had had so much in childhood, Eddie and Dilly because they had had rather too little." It was Edmund and Dillwyn who married and had children; Wilfred and Ronald took vows of celibacy (in Ronald's case, long before he became a Catholic priest), in line with the family characteristic of choosing the most difficult of any range of options.

A psychologist would find much to study in the various control mechanisms the brothers developed: the invention of elaborate games with exacting rules; the relish for wordplay, crosswords, codes; the mastery of languages; the preoccupation with railway timetables . . . all were devices for limiting possibility, exerting total authority in an intellectual field—in short, for being *safe*. This went beyond reserve or shyness (which they also possessed to an unusual degree); it signaled a fear of spontaneity or of emotional risk-taking. Ronald's early, fervent friendships with young men, like his later closeness to the convert Lady Acton, were perceived by him as dangers, not as means of grace. Dillwyn replaced his religious faith by a more insidious faith in the power of reason. He had little gift for human relationships, falling back on the icy question "Why do you say that?" when confronted by some piece of sentiment, and forgetting to invite his brothers to his wedding. He and his wife, in Mrs. Fitzgerald's searing phrase, "loved each other for twenty years without being able to make each other happy." Wilfred took truthfulness to the point of brutality; in the judgment of one of his former students, "He somehow communicated with everyone a deep love from a

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broken, unloving man." He assumed he was unlovable, and could not bear evidence to the contrary, so he resolved to make it as hard as possible for anyone to love him. Behind this, as behind Ronald's obtrusive humility and Dillwyn's awesome inattentiveness to the obligations of ordinary life, there lay wilfulness, even a kind of unconscious pride. Their mother had been taken from them, their father had become estranged from two of them (Ronald and Wilfred) on theological grounds; their revenge was variously to abandon belief in God, or to embrace a kind of belief which made joy and peace fugitive and fleeting. They were too aware of the transience of things to be content with contentment.

"Evoe," Mrs. Fitzgerald's father (pronounced like his initials E.V., it is a Bacchic cry of celebration in Greek), the oldest and longest-lived brother, was also the most balanced in temperament. His predecessor as editor of *Punch*, Sir Owen Seaman, who occupied the post from 1905 to 1932, was conservative, imperialist, and high-minded. In England these were not seen as disqualifications for supervising a humorous weekly, but as an extra, delicious joke. Evoe brought in younger writers and artists, allowed a vein of fantasy, even surrealism, to flourish, and encouraged a political radicalism that would have horrified Seaman. Evoe's dexterity in rhyming, his quick-witted word-play, were legendary; invited to address the Omar Khayyam Society, he began with "Unaccustomarkhayyam to public speaking." Yet he too had demons to exorcize. He left Oxford, to Bishop Knox's disappointment, without a degree, although the university gave him an honorary doctorate fifty years later; he was wounded at Passchendaele and felt unable to comply with Seaman's requests for amusing articles from the trenches; like his father he was married twice, his first wife dying after they had been together twenty-three years. As to his view of God, who bulked so large in Ronald's and Wilfred's lives and whose absence was so much resented by Dillwyn, Mrs. Fitzgerald gives us few clues, beyond

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his own words that in his childhood "Church did not seem to rub off properly" on him. He was an Edwardian Englishman, too worldly-wise to be bothered with subtleties, and too anxious not to let seriousness slide into solemnity or pomposity. Wry detachment, he declared in a lecture at Cambridge in 1959, was the proper spirit of the age, "the power to be startled by nothing, however extravagant."

All the brothers were writers. Edmund's light verse and other journalism are forgotten now; only Greek specialists read Dillwyn's edition of the fourth-century satirist Herodas; more recent scholarship has overtaken Wilfred's work on the New Testament; Ronald's voluminous writings keep their circle of devotees. There is something of the quality of a faded sepia photograph, too, in Mrs. Fitzgerald's book; it is all a long time ago, and faintly sad. The intellectual and social milieu in which the Knoxes felt happiest was that prior to 1914, the year which changed everyone's lives for ever. Like many others, they may have felt guilty about surviving; they certainly felt increasingly bewildered. They kept the twentieth century at bay with wit, ingenuity, and, when necessary, indignation. In their characteristically understated fashion, they rebuked a generation which believed that the world owed it a living, that pleasure is the only good, or, most dangerous delusion of all, that human beings have a right to be happy.

—*Paul Dean*

David Gergen Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership, Nixon to Clinton. Simon & Schuster, 382 pages, $26

Since full disclosure is all the rage these days, I should disclose fully. I first met David Gergen almost a decade ago when I was a research assistant to Ben Wattenberg. Gergen and Wattenberg were collaborating on a PBS documentary about America's political parties. Ben, famous for being one of the first and last neoconservative Democrats, fretted over a party he felt had drifted too far to the left. Gergen, with whom I ended up working closely (mostly doing creative photocopying and fetching), subtly bemoaned a Republican party that had moved too far to the right. Ben lionized Al From, head of the then little-known Democratic Leadership Council. Gergen favored then-senators Warren Rudman and William Cohen (now Clinton's Secretary of Defense) and the HUD secretary Jack Kemp.

I next met Gergen in July of 1998, in the midst of the Monica Lewinsky affair. We were both guests on "Larry King Live." Right before our segment ended, I responded to the argument that because Clinton is a "good" president on technical issues he should get a free pass on how he had conducted himself during the Lewinsky affair: "You can't say 'Well, Bill Clinton is like a good mechanic, and therefore we should leave him alone.' That's like saying 'Joey Buttafuoco is a good mechanic, we should leave him alone.'" My bit of rhetorical flourish horrified Gergen. He said, "Joey Buttafuoco? . . . Get word to the control room. . . . turn the cameras back on! We can't let that stand."

In short, David Gergen is a man of sincerely moderate and diplomatic politics in both style and substance. He is a very sharp man with a very dull ideology. He is also a man drawn to power. But he is more of a gunsmith than a gunman, preferring to fashion, hone, and package other people's power than wield it himself. Still, in Washington media circles that's a kind of power in itself.

All of this comes out in his new book, *Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership, Nixon to Clinton*. There are two clues right off that this is no conventional tell-all. First, he says so. Gergen admirably doesn't believe in writing tell-alls about the people he worked for. The second, and closely related, clue is that this book is vastly less interesting than a tell-all would be. Because Gergen

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won't say anything bad about anyone without saying something at least equally good—the second chapter on Nixon is entitled "The Bright Side"—there's almost no edge to *Eyewitness to Power.* Gergen criticizes Hillary Clinton's stab at a co-presidency and semi-socialized medicine, only to turn and sprint back in the other direction like a basketball player running suicides during practice. "Over the eighteen months I worked with Hillary," writes Gergen, "I gained great respect for her as a champion of social causes." Libel lawyers won't make a dime off Gergen; the nastiest one-sided barb I could find was that he holds John Dean in "minimal high regard."

Eyewitness to Power is at times quite well-written, but his lessons for leadership often boil down to the sort of stuff handed out at corporate seminars on good management skills. Indeed, some sentences seem to be lifted straight from the "Successories" posters you can buy from those in-flight airline catalogs. It may be more forgivable, because Gergen is trying to lead by example—after all, he informs us, "Leadership Starts from Within"—but it makes it no less annoying. Of course, there's plenty of good advice; get enough sleep (something Clinton did not do in his first year), listen to your opponents, don't lie, etc.

And all of this is fine in the sense that there's certainly ample room in the political culture for polite people to write polite books. But politeness has its problems when translated into policy. More than anything else, Mr. Gergen is a high priest of the inside-the-beltway faith. It was for this reason that Bill Clinton hired him just nineteen weeks into the administration. "When Bill Clinton is in trouble, he looks for a quick fix," writes Gergen. "I know I was one of them." While it was spun—by Gergen himself at the time—that the appointment of a life-long Republican was an attempt at bipartisanship, the reality was that the young administration desperately needed an adviser who could explain how Washington works.

A hallmark of Gergen's beltway religion is a rejection of eschatology of any kind; for Gergen-types it's inconceivable to think of existing arrangements coming to an end or even to imagine why you would want them to. Therefore it is always ill-advised to criticize an opponent too harshly or call for the elimination of any major program or approach. The only way someone in power can be 100 percent wrong is in hindsight.

"Power-worship blurs political judgment because it leads, almost unavoidably, to the belief that present trends will continue," George Orwell wrote in 1946. He was referring to Western intellectuals and journalists who had consistently reversed their predictions of who would win or lose the war after every Allied or Nazi victory. But the principle is just as true today. Witness all of the pundits who insisted welfare dependency or crime could never go down or who believe strong standing in the polls today means strong standing forever.

Gergen recounts how he fought Tony Dolan, the speechwriter who pushed for Reagan to say the words "evil empire" in a speech to evangelical Christians in 1983. Gergen feared it might "upset" U.S. diplomacy. After all, like most members of the political class, Gergen believed that the Soviet Union was a permanent fixture of the global landscape, so why be so rude to a country that wasn't going anywhere? "I hate to admit it, but it's true: history has shown that Tony Dolan was right and I was wrong," Gergen writes.

This is the great irony of *Eyewitness to Power.* Gergen's "elemental" lessons of leadership favor boldness and rhetorical clarity in the executive. But in his own politics and as a contemporary commentator Gergen consistently favors incrementalism and difference-splitting. It is only in retrospect that Gergen can see anything as clear-cut at all, and even then only when the vast Washington consensus confirms, or prompts, his conclusion. Without that confirmation, all bets must be hedged and all judgments on-the-one-hand-but-on-the-other-hand.

There is a name, by the way, for this sort

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of politics. In an earlier era, we called it "me-too" Republicanism. Since then it has evolved into what some people call the "Third Way," "triangulation," or simply Clintonism. Its essential insight is that government should borrow ideas from all quarters because, even if the government must surrender a bit of technical power—by accommodating the market, for example—it gains in moral and political authority and esteem. Gergen doesn't talk much about the upcoming election—who wants to offend a potential winner at this stage? But in a sense both candidates represent different strains of this approach. Al Gore's rhetoric is strictly leftist, but no one believes him because he is a profound and remorseless liar and because his record is steadfastly centrist. George W. Bush is in fact the more recognizable Third Wayer. "Compassionate Conservatism" was never so much the Republican alternative to Clintonism as the Republican version of it. In the recent presidential debates, much of the disagreement boiled down to which candidate could provide prescription drugs faster, not whether they should or shouldn't be provided at all. In this sense we all worship at Gergen's altar now.

—*Jonah Goldberg*

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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Notebook

"The order passion yields": i.m. Edgar Bowers, 1924–2000

by David Yezzi

I carry one small memory of his form
Aslant at his clavier, with careful ease,
To bring one last enigma to the norm,
Intelligence perfecting the mute keys.
—"From J. Haydn to Constanze Mozart (1791)"

How will a generation know its story
If it will know no other?
—"For Louis Pasteur"

Edgar Bowers, who died in San Francisco of cancer on February 4 this year, wrote flawless poems, which may account for why there are so few. When his collected poems appeared from Knopf in 1997, he was pleased to have them handsomely printed and all in one place, but sorry that there were not more of them. "You're only a poet when you're writing a poem," he often said, wryly suspicious of the cult of the artist that would elevate writers to mystical status: "There's nothing beautiful about being a poet." Reckoned by his own clear-eyed standards, Bowers was a poet a relatively small part of the time, his published work limited to three full-length collections—*The Form of Loss* (1956), *The Astronomers* (1965), and *For Louis Pasteur* (1990). In 1973, *Living Together* returned his first two books to print, along with a handful of new poems, and a section of more recent work inaugurates his *Collected Poems*, a volume of fewer than two-hundred pages.

Bowers may have wished his books longer than they were, but he could hardly have wished them better. He polished each poem until nothing in it "bothered" him, as he would say, carefully eliminating each rough edge and infelicity until it was "uncorrectable." "It's all perfect," Thom Gunn has said of Bowers's work, yet if perfection provided the limit, Bowers remained modest about his chances of attaining it. As he suggested in "To the Reader," the prologue to his debut collection, error haunts even the finest attempts at order:

> These poems are too much tangled with the error
> And waste they would complete. My soul repays me,
> Who fix it by a rhythm, with reason's terror
> Of hearing the swift motion that betrays me.
> Mine be the life and the failure. But do not look
> Too closely for these ghosts which claim my book.

By "complete," Bowers meant "to perfect," an action forever bedeviled by fear and waste. A spiritual melancholy reminiscent of Ben Jonson and Fulke Greville underlies this early poem in its vision of the tangled error and swift motion that threaten to undermine art's attempts to "fix" experience in meaningful structures. As he put it elsewhere, in "The Astronomers of Mont Blanc," the living cannot attain "that perfect order trusted to the dead." (Only Bowers's

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beloved Mozart possessed the genius to create a "perfect note.")

Bowers's tone tempers melancholy with decorum, and stoic meditation with personal warmth, a quality most pronounced in his later work. His poetry combines the intellectual heft, formal play, and density of expression reminiscent of metaphysical wit with the associative imagery of Valéry (whom Bowers placed, with Mozart and Louis Pasteur, in his personal pantheon). Yvor Winters, with whom Bowers studied, called this the post-symbolist method, producing poems "rational in structure, although [the] explicitly rational connectives are suppressed," as in "Grove and Building":

> When, having watched for a long time the trees
> Scatter the sun among their shaded places,
> You turn away, your face is many faces,
> Each formed by the resistance of the leaves.
>
> And though the dim contagion in your eyes
> The agony of light which shade refuses
> With bright decay a near facade infuses,
> Drenched by the ebbing warmth of Paradise.

Bowers created a symbolic landscape against which the ancient metaphors of light and dark suggest something of man's relation to the divine. Although Bowers lived in a "difficult and sophisticated period," Winters explained, he "was still a great devotional poet, but of a sort that George Herbert would not have understood."

Like Geoffrey Hill, Bowers carried the moral seriousness of the religious impulse into a secular age. Also like Hill, Bowers, who served in the Second World War, grappled with the question of faith in light of the atrocities of the twentieth century. Bower's war experience as a counterintelligence officer assigned to the de-Nazification of Germany and then to Hitler's Alpine retreat at Berchtesgaden informed much of his work. Take "Two poems on the Catholic Bavarians":

> Thus in the summer on the Alpine heights
> A deity of senseless wrath and scorn
> Is feasted through the equinoctial nights
> As though a savage Christ were then reborn.
>
> Up from the floors of churches in December
> The passion rises to a turbulence
> Of darkness such as threatens to dismember
> The mind submerged in bestial innocence.

This last suggests, with Bowers's favored symbol of darkness, the dangers inherent in romanticism (Christ is reborn as a noble "savage"). The passage ends with voices "raging and distinct,/ About the curious symbol of the cross." The use of ambiguity here—the double meanings of "passion," "senseless," and "about"—recalls Hill's emphasis on the duplicity of language in a fallen age.

That Bowers is not better known says a good deal about recent poetry in the United States, which, after confessionalism, became obsessed with "impotence,/ Insanity and lying," as Bowers put it in "To the Contemporary Muse." Perhaps accordingly, many of his greatest admirers have been British, including Hill, Gunn, Dick Davis, and Clive Wilmer. Among his American adherents are Donald Justice, Timothy Steele, Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, and Harold Bloom. (Bowers "never wrote a bad poem in his life—which is almost unique," Bloom said recently.) Bowers received two Guggenheim Fellowships and, in 1988, the Bollingen Prize. Though his reputation would paint him as something of a poet's poet (his work can be difficult), his is one of the great voices of the late twentieth century, and it deserves to be more widely heard.

Edgar Bowers was born in Rome, Georgia, a self-styled "child of the South" who lived for most of his life in California. Both regions impressed themselves on his manner, his old-world formality and Southern accent tempered just slightly by the West Coast sublime. As a young man in the Armed Services Training Program at Princeton, Bowers roomed with a student of Allen Tate who introduced him to the

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poets of modernism. After the war Bowers returned to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where he read the New Critics, going on to Stanford (Ph.D., 1953) in 1947 to study with his favorite of that group, Yvor Winters. After short teaching stints back east at Duke University and Harpur College, Bowers settled in Santa Barbara, teaching at the University of California from 1958 until his retirement in 1991. It is there, in his house on Miramar Beach, that Wilmer remembers him "chatting wittily on his couch with the Pacific in all its grandeur breaking behind him."

Not surprisingly, the landscapes of California became increasingly prominent in his work, as his syntactically dense, philosophically charged lyrics gave way to more accessible elegies and tributes to friends. Exchanging the contexts of religion and the war for natural settings (some, like "Trees," recalled from boyhood), Bowers nonetheless stuck to his ongoing concerns of identity and what Dick Davis has called "the mystery of consciousness"[1]: "Who is it says 'I am'?," Bowers asks in "Autumn Shade." Beginning with "Autumn Shade," a poem in ten parts from *The Astronomers*, he made use of the poetic sequence, employing this structure in one of his greatest achievements, "Thirteen Views of Santa Barbara" —a poem, oddly, in fourteen sections and with an epilogue. Bowers devised the sequence after viewing an exhibition of Hokusai's "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji" (he later came to own a Hokusai print, which adorns the cover of his collected poems). Section four of the poem, "The Beach," typifies Bowers's expert way with blank verse, the signature form of his later work:

> In spring, we fish for halibut. In summer,
> When grunion spawn at midnight in the surf,
> We look for them on the sand to throw them
> back.
> In winter, from the point, we cast beyond
> The breakers to where bass feed. Solar age
> And mythic distance turn round the point's
> ellipse.
> Earth is dark. Air darkens. The moon is
> white.
> Then, as if I were there, I watch us here,
> Immensities of purpose barely visible
> Intent upon the message in the line
> Startlingly taut with sudden gravity,
> Muscle and bone of the reflected light.

The poem, like so many of Bowers's, considers the opposition of the ideal with the muddying properties of contingency. Yet it is the struggle that matters. As he put it in "From J. Haydn to Constanze Mozart (1791)," works of art represent "the mind's continual search/ To find the perfect note, emotional/ and mental, each the other one's reproach,"—what he calls elsewhere "the order passion yields."

One senses that, despite illness, Bowers grew more hopeful in his later years, ameliorating the brooding severity of his earlier poems and "occasionally extending to a positive joy," as Gunn has observed. The poems become more generous, more easily apprehensible, while still maintaining their evocative associativeness of imagery and riparian extravagances of syntax, as in this elegy for his friend the poet John Finlay:

> But when the sudden force of the disease
> Tossed him, in a new garment, on the bed
> Where he had wakened, mornings, as a child—
> Despised by all his neighbors, helpless blind
> And vulnerable to every life, he listened
> Intensely to the roosters, mules and cows
> As well as to the voices of the desk,
> The chair, the books and pictures, pastures
> and fields,
> The tree of every season, the age of seas
> And, on its surge, the age of galaxies,
> The bells within the spires of Cambridge,
> bodies
> And faces revealed or hidden in the flow,
> All that he knew or could imagine joined
> Together in the sound the stream flows
> through

1 For Davis's exceptional reading of Bowers's work, see his tribute in the July/August issue of *Poets & Writers*.

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> As witness of itself in every change,
> Each trusting in its continuities,
> All turning in a final radiant shell.

I knew Edgar Bowers only briefly, in the last year of his life. It was due solely to his generosity and consummately gracious nature that I felt as if I'd known him longer. On our second meeting, at his apartment overlooking San Francisco and the white-capped waters of the Golden Gate (he lived on a hill above that section of Lombard that tourists know as the windiest street in the world), I asked him about a copy of Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* that was on the coffee table. It was for a class that he was taking, he told me, with a younger man's bluff enthusiasm. As Davis notes, Bowers remained constantly curious. He would ask me what people of my generation were reading and what sorts of poetry we liked, and he was surprised and pleased when I explained that there were still some younger writers interested in metrical verse.

Bowers had become somewhat gloomy about the state of contemporary poetry. I got the sense from him that he no longer recognized in most current poetry those qualities and concerns that he had himself devoted so much attention to. In a radio interview last year, Bowers was asked what advice he might give to younger writers. His answer—at once heartfelt, unassuming, and lightly self-deprecating—is worth quoting at some length:

> I would advise them [he said] to read as much as they can and to learn what I call "the formal virtues." I'm an old reactionary. I don't like what they call free verse now. I think it's ruinous what has happened to the writing of poetry in general, because free verse—which of course was practiced by a few masters early in the century—has just become a kind of prose in lines. So I would advise them to study good poems and see what the formal principles are . . . to think of it as an art, which has for you these objective personal means by which you can master your subject, if "master" is not too strong a word. [This] will help you find the words you are looking for and make your better self come into existence for a while, which will write poems in a sense that you'll say, Did I write that? . . . Having this help of what I call the public formal virtues helps that being come into existence.

"And that much never can be obsolete," as Larkin wrote. Bowers's "better self," the one not bound by human error and change, can be found everywhere in his poems. One may look at Bowers the same way that he looked at his hero Mozart and marvel at a man who could bring "one last enigma to the norm,/ Intelligence perfecting the mute keys."

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The 26 audio cassettes listed here were chosen by a panel of experts who were asked to select only tapes which would be timely and relevant. Each has passed the simple test of genuine interest: "Would you want to listen to this tape again?"

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- **A** **Winston Churchill:** *We Await Undismayed the Pending Assault* (20 min.)
- **B** **Margaret Mead:** *How People Change* (25 min.)
- **C** **Bruno Bettelheim:** *Man's Identity in a Mass Society* (48 min.)
- **D** **Salvador DeMadariaga:** *The Myth of Disarmament* (24 min.)
- **E** **W. H. Auden:** *The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (59 min.)
- **F** **Carlos Castaneda:** *Don Juan: The Sorcerer* (38 min.)
- **G** **Albert Schweitzer:** *On Goethe (trans. by Thornton Wilder)* (80 min.)
- **H** **Jacques Barzun:** *Present-Day Thoughts on the Quality of Life* (31 min.)
- **I** **Erich Fromm:** *To Have or to Be: The Nature of the Psyche* (56 min.)
- **J** **Robert Frost:** *An Evening with Robert Frost* (55 min.)
- **K** **Buckminster Fuller:** *Twentieth-Century Renaissance* (55 min.)
- **L** **Jacob Bronowski:** *The Ascent of Man* (55 min.)
- **M** **Gilbert Highet:** *Proverbs and Anatomy of Slang* (30 min.)
- **N** **Viktor E. Frankl:** *What Is Meant by Meaning* (33 min.)
- **O** **G. Wilson Knight:** *Shakespeare and the English Language* (30 min.)
- **P** **Robert Lowell:** *Reads and Discusses His Poetry* (28 min.)
- **Q** **William Manchester:** *The Glory and the Dream* (55 min.)
- **R** **Groucho Marx:** *Fast Mind, Faster Mouth* (60 min.)
- **S** **Edwin Newman:** *Decline and Fall of American Language* (55 min.)
- **T** **William Morris:** *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* (55 min.)
- **U** **George W. Kisker:** *Programmed Relaxation* (25 min.)
- **V** **William Saroyan:** *The Real World of the Writer* (48 min.)
- **W** **Upton Sinclair:** *A Pen to Change America* (40 min.)
- **X** **Stephen Spender:** *T.S. Eliot and George Orwell* (41 min.)
- **Y** **Eudora Welty:** *Learning to Write Fiction* (53 min.)
- **Z** **Arnold Toynbee:** *The Ancient Mediterranean View of Man* (24 min.)

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"Williams has a warm, relaxed, chatty style and a roving, inquiring mind that lend both conviction and interest to his writings."
–*New York Times Book Review* on Paul Williams

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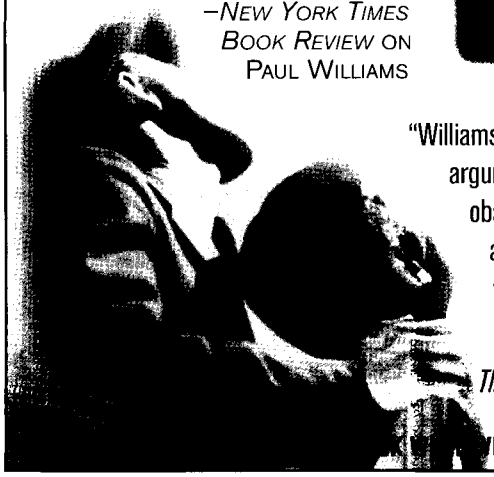

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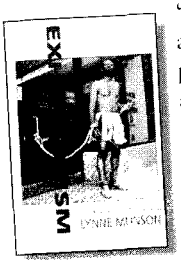

"Her subject is the advance of postmodernist academism and how its orthodoxies and prejudices have affected museums, the teaching of art history, the policy of the NEA, and the lives of independent artists. The subject is hot. Her tone is cool. Her case histories speak for themselves. This is a brave book."—ANDREW FORGE, painter and professor of art emeritus, Yale School of Art.

MYRON MAGNET, EDITOR
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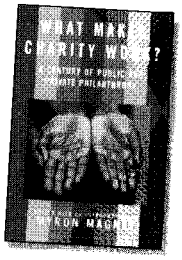
A Century of Public and Private Philanthropy.



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